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OR,
GATHERING THE GUILTY GANG.

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AUTHOR OF "MUTE MERLE," "BUCKSKIN DE-
TECTIVE," "LITTLE LON," "OLD SKINNER,"
"THE DOCK DETECTIVE," THE "DODGER
DICK," NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MR. MOSES'S CUSTOMERS.

IN spite of his name Mr. Mordecai Moses was not a Jew. He did business on Baxter street, New York, and three gilded balls were suspended over the entrance to his establishment, but he was an American all the same, though not an honor to his race.

He was small and dark-faced, had one deeply sunken eye which seemed to see as much as two

THE BOY SHADOWER DARED NOT MAKE THE SLIGHTEST MOVEMENT. HIS LIFE SEEMED TO DEPEND ON LYING PERFECTLY QUIET ON THE LIMB.

ordinary ones; and could tell the commercial value of anything brought to his shop the moment he saw it.

Mr. Moses was about to close his shutters one night, after a dull day, when a woman turned suddenly aside from the middle of the pavement and walked into his place.

In an instant Mordecai had pounced upon her like a hawk.

He saw that his customer was still young, though by no means good looking, and her manner indicated that she had visited him on secret business.

Finding herself alone with the pawnbroker, she took a leather purse from her pocket and leaned over the counter.

If the little man expected to see a jewel of great value he was disappointed, for, instead, he beheld one of his own tickets which the woman had brought "home."

She placed the ticket before the pawnbroker and met his astonished look with a placid smile. The bit of card-board bore the number 666, and he knew he had never issued it to her.

"Did he send you after the article?" asked old Mordecai, taking up the ticket.

"How do you think I came by it?" snapped the caller. "If you ask questions here, we'll patronize another shop hereafter."

Again eying the ticket to make sure that no deception was being practiced, the pawnbroker moved away, carefully watched by the customer.

In a short time he came back and pushed a small package across the counter. It was a square affair, of the length and breadth of one's hand, and about six inches high. It was wrapped in brown paper and well tied, though the knot looked a good deal fresher than the covering.

As she took the packet, the woman deposited twenty dollars before old Mordecai, and then whisked out of the shop before she could be restrained.

"I don't know about that; but, let it go," muttered the pawnbroker, shaking his head. "I think I would rather have kept the package. If I had the right person here, I'd have her followed." And, apparently dismissing the incident from his mind, he closed for the night and retired to the room above the store where he slept.

Half an hour later he was startled by a series of raps, and, raising the window, he saw a very small figure under the three balls, and was greeted with:

"Get up, Moses! I think I've got the starting of a fortune for you. Ho! you old sleepy-head! Do you want me to take my trade down-town?"

"What is it now, Billy?"

"More than you think," came up from below.

The one-eyed pawnbroker lowered the sash, and in a little while had opened his front door.

In popped an agile little figure, a boy, with a pair of gleaming black eyes, and in the common garb of a street Arab.

"Now, what is it, Bantam?" demanded old Mordecai, brusquely. "Speak out!"

"Not so fast!" replied the Arab; "I guess I don't have to give you the pointers I've picked up. No, not much, Mr. Moses."

The pawnbroker instantly changed his tactics. He was afraid that the boy had an important secret and he did not want to miss it; so he asked the street scout's pardon, and the boy seemed satisfied, for one hand disappeared in a pocket, and a singular looking object was deposited on the counter.

Singular, we say, for its like had never greeted old Mordecai's eyes, though some strange things had come to him in the usual way.

It was a gold cross, around which twined a silver serpent, the head of the reptile peeping over one of the arms, from behind. Its eyes were two brilliant emeralds, and the tip of the tail a stone of the same kind.

"What'll you advance on that?" queried the boy.

The pawnbroker looked at the youngster in utter amazement.

"I don't want to get into trouble," said he.

"Into trouble?" repeated the boy. "Who said you'd get there?"

"No one, of course, but I know a thing or two."

"I think I didn't come by it honestly, don't you?" exclaimed Billy, reaching over the counter for the cross.

"I haven't said so."

"No; but I've seen you before. Come! give me back the cross if you don't want to give me a raise on it."

"How much, Billy?"

"Fifty."

The pawnbroker uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"Why don't you want a thousand?" he cried.

"This isn't the Kohinoor, you young scamp."

"Of course it ain't! You don't pick the Kohinoor up in New York, either. Don't want it at fifty, hey?"

"I'd like to know, first—"

"Not from me, Mr. Moses!" interrupted the gamin. "A first-class business man like I've taken you to be, asks no questions. If you don't want the gem on the terms I've stated, I'll try somebody else."

It was one of old Mordecai's business principles not to let anything slip through his fingers that promised a bargain, and the result of his interview with the boy was the payment of fifty dollars as a loan on the gold cross, and the acquirement of the prize. This bit of business seemed to compensate him for the transaction with the unknown woman, and he was not unwilling to see Master Bantam quit his establishment with fifty dollars of his money in his pocket.

"I told him I'd get something on it!" murmured the boy, skipping away. "I didn't like to strike the old shark for too much, for fear he'd kick. We'll redeem the cross in time. That is, I'll help the gentleman to do it. I believe he came by it honestly, and if half what he tells me is true, somebody ought to go to the gallows."

If Mordecai Moses had followed his young customer, he would have seen him dodge into a certain open hallway a good many squares from his shop, and run nimbly up-stairs to the third story.

A few feet from the landing he opened a door and entered a room dimly lighted.

"What! back already?" exclaimed a voice.

"Bet yer life, colonel!" was the response.

"Didn't think I had to go to Chicago, did you?"

A low laugh answered the boy's sally, and in a moment Billy was looking into the pale and almost deathly face of a man who reclined in an arm-chair. He was propped up by cushions, and one could see by his sunken eyes and cheeks that, unless some miraculous change took place, he would soon cross the threshold of "the undiscovered country."

He might have been forty-five years old; but his looks rendered it difficult for one to guess with any degree of exactness. He appeared to be a person of refinement.

"Here's the stuff," resumed Billy, placing the roll of bills in the man's hands.

"Not this much?" he exclaimed, with a look of wonder.

"Not a cent less than fifty, colonel."

"You're worth your weight in gold, my boy!"

"Not in gold, but old iron, mebbe!" chuckled the gamin. "I knew where to take the cross, and there's a good deal in knowing, you see."

"That's more than half the battle. Now, I'll send the message. I couldn't do it before. And if you see anything of my cormorant landlord watching my door, tell him to drop in and get every dollar of his rent."

The speaker took from his bosom a slip of paper which he handed to Billy, together with one of the bills from the lot.

"Send it off as soon as possible," he continued.

"The address is on the paper. Then come back here."

"I'll do it all!" assented Billy, cheerfully, and soon he was on the street once more, to rush ten minutes later into a telegraph office, where he at once handed the message to one of the operators, a young lady.

The young person must have thought it a strange message, for she looked from it to the boy, and seemed on the eve of asking him a question, but she did not, and made the change in silence.

Almost before Billy could withdraw, the following message was flying over the wires, its destination New Orleans:

"LEMUUEL LYNX:—

"They are here; but my hand is dead, and I can't hold on long. Come! POYNTER."

The lad went back to the man in the chair. He had fallen asleep, and did not hear Billy come in.

"I never saw a man have his nerve," thought he, while he watched the invalid. "He is dead now, all but that wonderful head of his!"

Just then the sleeper awoke with a start and Billy went forward.

"Is it on its journey?" he asked, his eye brightening.

"No; it's *there*," replied the messenger.

"Thank heaven! He'll come the moment he reads it. Then let the infamous scoundrels go out! But, what is that on your pants, boy?"

"Mud."

"Mud? What! is the weather moist?"

"No. I got it *under ground*."

The man's look was a strange query.

CHAPTER II.

THE TWO HAWKS.

THE man called "Colonel" by the boy looked at the soiled pantaloons again and then glanced into the owner's face.

"Been making a mole of yourself, have you?" he smiled.

"I've been underground any way," replied the gamin—"playing a beagle after a human fox."

The man in the chair said nothing for a moment.

He fell to looking at the pawn-ticket which Billy had brought back with him from his transaction with Mordecai Moses.

"Was the old fellow hard to deal with?" he queried.

"Rather."

"Did he ask you how you came by the cross?"

"Not just exactly, but his eyes said a good deal."

"We won't let him keep it very long if nothing goes amiss with us," continued Poynter. "I kept it till the last moment. Nothing but poverty made me give it up."

He seemed to grind his teeth as if he hated the very words he had just spoken.

"We all have our dark days," observed the boy, consolingly. "I've had mine, colonel. My clothes look like I'm still in the dumps, but what's the use o' kicking? It never does one any good. Everybody can't be on top at once, and my experience is that the fellows at the bottom of the heap don't have to do all the growling, if they don't want to."

Colonel Poynter looked strangely at Billy while he spoke. Something, either in the boy's nature or his speech, seemed to please him.

"Where's your mother, Billy?"

"Dead."

"When did she die?"

"Last summer."

"And your father?"

"He went three years ago. I'm alone in the world, colonel. If I were to drop out, I wouldn't be missed. But you would!"

"Who would miss me, Billy?"

"Why, the men we're playing against."

"So they would," smiled the occupant of the chair.

"Don't let's drop out!" and the hand of Billy fell lightly upon the man's arm, and rested there.

"Agreed!" exclaimed Poynter. "I'm not in very good shape; but, I'll agree to remain in the game to the end."

The boy saw that he spoke the last words through his teeth. The pale face seemed to flush, and the veins in the slim hands to get a new supply of blood.

A minute afterward Billy saw the head sink back among the pillows, and almost immediately Poynter was asleep.

The lad drew off and watched him a few moments.

"I wish I could find something that'd make him well again," he murmured. "They don't know where he is. I think they've lost track of him; but it isn't their fault."

Master Bantam stole to the door on tiptoe. He opened it softly and went out, closing the portal behind him.

Having done this, he went down to the sidewalk and looked carefully around before moving off.

The night was warm. Tenement New York was on the pavement enjoying itself.

Billy Bantam was seen and recognized by a dozen boys before he was a block away; but he resisted their overtures in good humor, and kept on.

Did he know that he was followed? Did he see the man who had caught sight of him, and who was eying him like a hawk?

Billy turned down the first street, went three squares further, with the man still at his heels, and disappeared in a narrow passage between two houses.

The hawk came to the mouth of the passage, and looked down it after the boy.

Billy did not traverse the dark place far.

A few yards from the pavement he lifted a latch, which his sharp eyes found, and let himself into a cramped back yard.

In a short time he had opened a door, and

presented himself to a young girl of perhaps eighteen, and quite pretty. She greeted the boy with a smile. "Where are you from?" she inquired. "From him," answered the street scout. The girl at once became interested. "Why not tell me now, Billy?" she said, insinuatingly.

"About him?"
"Yes."
"I don't know much."
"But you know something."
The boy did not reply.
"If it's a secret, I don't want to rob you," continued the girl.

"I oughtn't to have any secrets from you, Nanice," he smiled. "You've been my friend through thick and thin. Here goes! Colonel Poynter came from the South six months ago. He used to be rich, and he would be so now were it not for as precious a pair of rascals as ever breathed. He had the settling of a big estate; but one night every paper was stolen. Right upon the heels of this a report got circulated to the effect that the theft was a fraud—that he had destroyed the documents in order to appropriate the estate to his own use.

"That was all bosh, Nanice—all a part of the big scheme against Colonel Poynter. He put some detectives after the thieves, but they have failed to find them. He took the trail himself. He spent thousands in the hunt. He came North, as I have said, six months ago. One night he waked up in his sleep and drank from the glass he kept near his bed. Within a minute a thousand pains shot through his body. Foolishly, he took another drink.

"From that night he went down hill. He wasted away like a man dying with the consumption. The water had been poisoned, but when and by whom? The poison is all through his system, and he knows that there is no hope for him. But I never saw a man of his nerve. He says that he is not going to die until he has brought the real thieves to justice, and vindicated his own name. His brain works better than his hands. As he said in the dispatch I sent to Lemuel Lynx to-night, they are virtually dead."

"Who is Lemuel Lynx?" asked the girl.
"A detective in New Orleans, the only one who kept faith with the colonel when his wealth had departed."

"What! Is he really poor?"
"I helped him make a raise to-night."

"You? how?"
"I pawned for him his last keepsake, a gold cross with a silver snake twined about it."

"I'd like to see Colonel Poynter," said Nanice.
"Some-how-or-other, I'm interested in him; on your account, I suppose, Billy."

"He's every inch a gentleman!" exclaimed the boy. "If he wasn't, you wouldn't find William Bantam associated with him. When Lemuel Lynx comes, we'll close in on the rascals."

"Are they in New York?"
"They are here."

A very natural question was on the girl's tongue.

"Let's stop right here for the present," resumed Billy. "I don't like to tell all I know, and you'll not think hard of me for saying so, will you, Nanice?"

"You know I won't."

The boy sprang forward and kissed the girl, who playfully threw her arms around him and kissed him back.

They did not look like brother and sister, but, such they were.

"Won't they seek to harm you if they discover that you are Colonel Poynter's friend?" she asked.

"Of course they will; but maybe they won't find that out."

"Be cautious!"

"I'm old Caution, Nanice!" asserted the gamin, proudly. "They don't catch beagles asleep, when the game is flushed you know."

"But beagles sometimes get into a hole and cannot get out, you know."

"Not this one!" laughed the lad. "Not Colonel Poynter's beagle, girl. No hole will hold him!"

Nanice looked at her gamin brother with a good deal of pride. When Billy told Poynter that he was "alone in the world," he had not seen fit to mention his sister, and few, indeed, knew that the boy had one so near of kin.

When Billy emerged from the narrow passage, he was met by the human hawk still on guard.

He started off, with the shadower again at his heels.

A few blocks away the trailer came across another man to whom he whispered, as he nodded toward Billy.

"That is the mole whose tracks we saw today. Take care of him, and don't let him escape you! If we're baffled by a boy, I'll turn parson," and from that moment Master Bantam was watched by a new hawk as keen as the first.

CHAPTER III.

A LYNX AND A LOSS.

BILLY BANTAM had become acquainted with Colonel Fergus Poynter some time before the opening of our story.

He was one night asked to run an errand for a very pale though handsome man who was airing himself in the Park, and from that hour he dated his acquaintance with the Southerner.

It was not long before he became closely drawn to the man who was trying to vindicate his name, and who, as Billy told his sister, had been mysteriously poisoned in the night.

Poynter unreservedly told the boy all about his troubles, and the two had worked together up to the time of their introduction to the reader.

The police of New York were not inclined to listen to the Southerner's story. He had spent a fortune in search of the men who had wronged him, and, broken in health and penniless, he found himself almost friendless.

But for Billy Bantam's assistance and words of cheer, he might have given up the struggle, eager as he was to win a final victory.

A few days after the events detailed in the foregoing chapters, the boy detective found a strange man with his friend.

He at once surmised that Lemuel Lynx, the New Orleans Vidocq, had come.

This was true, for Poynter introduced him to the gentleman to whom he had sent the telegram which had puzzled the girl operator with its singular language.

"I don't like him!" was the boy's mental verdict, after a brief study of Lemuel Lynx's appearance.

He was a dark-complexioned man of forty, had a pair of observing eyes that seemed to see everything at once, and a harsh, overbearing voice that did not impress Billy favorably.

The detective listened attentively to the story told by Poynter from his chair, and the boy thought he treated a good deal of the narrative with contempt.

"Maybe I should not judge him too soon," thought the lad. "I'm not used to these Southern detectives; and, then, the colonel puts a good deal of confidence in Mr. Lynx. I'll give him a trial, anyhow."

"What have you discovered? The colonel says you've been helping him," remarked Lemuel Lynx to Billy a short time after his interview with the sick man.

"Not much," answered the boy, shaking his head.

"But a little, eh?" persisted the detective.

"Yes, a little."

The two occupied one of the settees in a certain Square to which Lynx had led Billy.

He seemed to have a singular knowledge of the nooks of New York for one who plied his calling in the Crescent City.

Billy Bantam was still suspicious of Mr. Lynx, and he answered his questions with a good deal of caution.

He remembered having told his sister that he was Colonel Poynter's "weasel," and he seemed to have resolved anew that he would not get "caught."

He went so far as to tell the Southern detective that he believed Poynter's enemies were then in New York, that they were determined to put his friend out of the way; and he added, with some emphasis, that he had resolved that they should not triumph.

"I see! You've been playing ferret for the colonel!"

"I've been helping him," replied Billy.

"Now the game will open in earnest. We'll show these rascals that they are dealing with a foe worthy of their steel. I'll soon have them where the colonel wants them. I've dealt with rogues before."

There was too much pomposity about Lemuel Lynx to suit Billy.

The next night the boy detective saw the New Orleans detective board a street car and ensconce himself in the corner nearest the driver.

He sat there with his hat drawn over his eyes, and Billy watched him from the rear platform as the car jolted along.

Lemuel Lynx did not quit the car until it had carried him more than twenty squares from the place where he had boarded it.

Billy Bantam was nimble enough to avoid him

when he alighted, and saw the detective take a bee-line for a certain house which stood a few yards away.

"He knows New York like a book!" decided the gamin. "Something's wrong here."

He saw the New Orleans detective enter the house, which was a well-to-do structure, and the door close behind him.

Resolved to see more, if possible, Billy made his way to the rear of the premises, and reached one of the rear windows. It was tightly shuttered, but this circumstance did not deter him.

It was not long before the boy detective was looking between two slats into a room which had a light and, at the time, two occupants—a man and a woman.

The former was Lemuel Lynx, the other a person of middle age, and not at all good looking.

While the boy looked, a door leading into the room opened and a man entered.

"Hol!" ejaculated the window spy. "I begin to see something now. If that isn't a pretty 'hand,' I miss my guess!"

The new-comer was tall and good looking. He greeted the Southern detective with a hearty hand-shake, and the woman seemed pleased with the meeting.

"How did you find him?" asked the tall man, addressing Lemuel Lynx.

"About as I expected."

"He sent for you?"

"Yes."

All three laughed.

"Has he hopes?" continued the last arrival.

"Plenty of them."

"He is a man of nerve!" exclaimed the woman. "Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have given up the struggle long ago."

"Colonel Poynter is the hundredth man," answered Lynx, and then he asked a question which startled the young spy at the window.

"What has the street vagabond done?"

The tall man burst into a light laugh.

"Oh, you've seen his young friend, then?" he cried.

"Yes. I've met the boy, Billy Bantam, as he calls himself. What has he done?"

"Not a great deal. He's kept Poynter in good spirits, and he's given us a little trouble. We don't mind him, though, for we can put our hands upon him whenever we want him."

"That is good," added Lemuel Lynx. "How long do you think he will hold out?"

"Probably a month yet."

It was the woman who answered the question, and she leaned across the table while she spoke.

"He's poured his fortune into a rat-hole," she went on. "He did not seem to see it at any time. We've kept beyond his fingers without much trouble, though if he had picked up the right persons, we might not have fared so well."

"I see," laughed the New Orleans detective.

"With no one but a boy to take stock in his story, you may know that we have not had to play a very deep game."

"That is clear."

Billy Bantam had heard every word of the conversation thus far; but from this point he was permitted to hear no more.

The people whom he watched suddenly adjourned to another room, and the place of the overheard consultation was dark once more.

But he had heard a great deal.

It had confirmed his suspicions concerning Lemuel Lynx, and had enabled him to see the New Orleans sleuth-hound in a new light.

What should he do? Should he go back to Colonel Poynter and tell him all?

Perhaps it would be best to watch Lynx a little further. By doing so, he might be able to lay bare the whole conspiracy and perform the greatest service of all to the man who had become his friend.

Billy withdrew from the vicinity of the house and went back.

The hour was not late, and Mordecai Moses had not closed his establishment for the night when he reached it on his way down-town.

"Do you want it already?" queried the pawnbroker, as the boy appeared suddenly to him like an apparition.

"Not yet, Mordecai," was the response.

"You have it still, I presume?"

"Certainly I have. Let me show you."

Billy would have restrained old Mordecai from producing the pawned cross, but he had left him and was already opening a safe in one corner of his shop.

"My God!" suddenly cried the pawnbroker, and the next moment Billy saw a blanched face pop above the counter.

"What is it, Mr. Moses?" he inquired.

"It is gone! I have been robbed!"

The street scout went forward in sudden haste.

"Robbed?" he repeated. "Not so bad as that, I hope!"

"It is not there now!" answered the pawnbroker, pointing excitedly to one of the shelves beyond the iron door. "The cross which you left with me is gone!"

The boy saw that Mordecai Moses's consternation was genuine; that he had really been robbed; and that, in all probability, Colonel Poynter's gold cross had been taken.

"I never saw anything like it," resumed the old man when he had recovered his breath. "The safe has not been blown open. The lock don't seem to have been tampered with; but I have been plundered—robbed—all the same."

"What about the combination?" queried the street scout.

"There wasn't any. I've had that safe these twenty years, and I've never been robbed before."

Billy smiled contemptuously at the man who had refused to protect his customers in order to save the cost of the latest improvements in locks.

"What has been taken, Mr. Moses?" he asked.

"Nothing but the cross."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do?" cried the pawnbroker, in whining tones.

"Then I know what I'll do!" retorted the boy shadow, moving toward the door. "I'll find both the cross and the thief!" and he was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

A NARROW MARGIN.

THE young street scout detective did not go back to the sick man and tell him about the loss he had sustained.

He thought it best to keep the secret to himself for the present, or at least until he had made an attempt to recover the missing cross.

Colonel Poynter knew nothing of his discovery of Lemuel Lynx in consultation with the man and woman in the shuttered house. He would be left to think that the New Orleans detective was true to his interests, when he was doubtless playing a double-handed game, and that in league with his enemies.

Billy was puzzled over the robbery of the pawnbroker's safe.

He did not believe that old Mordecai was connected with the crime, for the pawnbroker had a wholesome dread of the law. He knew that it would ruin his business to be convicted of being a thief's accomplice, although he had been engaged in some questionable transactions.

Billy went back to the house where he had watched the Southern detective and his companions. But now the place and its surroundings were dark, and the house seemed deserted by the living.

"I'd like to know more about them," mentally exclaimed the street scout. "I've seen the man and woman before, but I had no idea that the colonel's shadow would seek them out. Lynx is a big fraud. He has the entire confidence of the man whom he pretends to serve. He is no better than the others who have fleeced Poynter. I believe he is the greatest scoundrel of them all."

Billy was about to quit the spot when the front door of the house opened and a head was thrust out.

"The woman!" softly ejaculated the shadower.

The following moment a female figure came down the steps and glided away.

"I'll see what's in this," decided the Boy Beagle. "She's been a sort of mystery to me long enough, and now, since I've found out that Lemuel Lynx knows her, I'm more than anxious to follow the trail."

The Boy Beagle had no difficulty in keeping his quarry in sight. He tracked the woman to a house some twenty squares away. She ran up the steps and jerked the bell-knob, and disappeared beyond the door.

"A doctor's house, eh?" exclaimed the boy ferret, reading the tin sign to the left of the door. "She comes a long distance to consult a physician. Can't be an urgent case, or she'd have found a doctor nearer home."

The sign bore this inscription:

"DOCTOR OTTO.

THE WORLD'S BENEFACITOR.

COME IN AND BE CURED."

"Quack! quack! quack!" said Billy, imitating a duck. "Let me see. What's the matter with me? I'm troubled with the shorts. Maybe I'll give you a call before long, doctor. The colonel ought to hear of you, and he may if the woman

now in your presence turns out to be something more than an ordinary patient."

The longer the watcher remained in front of the house the stronger became his curiosity to know something about what was going on inside.

He moved to the window, but it was so well curtained beyond the shutter that he could see nothing.

All at once he caught a sudden gleam of light overhead. It shone for a moment among the boughs of a tree which grew at the edge of the pavement, and then vanished, to come back and remain stationary a little later on.

The boy clambered to the first fork of the tree. He rested there a moment and proceeded on up. In a few moments he was on a level with the window from which the bright light came, and, crawling out on the stout bough toward the house, he began to use his sharp eyes to advantage.

He found himself looking into a room in which sat a young man with a dark Italian-like face. He was strikingly handsome; had jet-black eyes and a well-cared-for mustache, and his whole person had the appearance of a gentleman.

If this man was Dr. Otto, and Billy did not doubt it, he was not alone.

His companion was the woman whom the young detective had followed to the house.

She had removed her bonnet, and Billy saw that she was neither very young nor very handsome.

Dr. Otto was in his shirt-sleeves, as if he had been at work, or had been roused from slumber by the late call.

He was talking when the boy caught sight of the pair, and Billy anxious to hear what he was saying placed one ear close to the sill.

"When did he come?" he heard the doctor ask.

"A few hours ago. He was sent for."

"Ah!"

"Yes. He was summoned from the South by the sick man."

"And was eager to come, no doubt?"

"He did not hold back, you may depend upon that," was the reply.

"How does he look?"

"The same as he did when he was here last."

"Did he ask about me?"

"He did."

"And you told him—"

"That you had moved, but had not left the city."

Dr. Otto did not speak again for a minute.

"Will he hunt me up?" he finally asked.

"Do you want him to?"

"Not exactly; I can get along without that man; I hate traitors!"

Billy saw the woman frown.

"But we must make use of them sometimes," she reminded.

"You can't trust them!" exclaimed the young doctor. "They are always in the market. They will betray two masters a day. This man is a professional scoundrel. He makes double dealing his business. How do you know that he won't betray you one of these days?"

The woman fell back and looked wildly at Dr. Otto. There was no color in her face.

"He dare not do that!" she cried, clinching her hand.

"Ho! you don't know the man," was the retort.

"He dare not go back on me!"

"I say he will do anything," laughed the young Cure-All.

"You don't like him."

"No, I don't! I wish you had never become connected with him. Once a traitor, always one! You can't drop him. He has possession of the secret. He knows more than he should know. What does he call himself now?"

"Lemuel Lynx, detective."

A smile illumined the swarthy face of Dr. Otto for a moment.

"Does his victim trust him implicitly?" he queried.

"He does."

"How is he now?"

"Going down-hill all the time."

"Hopeful?"

"Not hopeful, but resolved to live until he has vindicated himself."

"With a traitor for his champion, ha, ha!" laughed the doctor.

"This is getting interesting!" muttered Billy, who had not lost a word, thanks to a glass which was broken at one corner. "There are four against the colonel, and I've got to fight the gang. It's a deep and deadly plot against him. The gang is merciless, but Doctor Otto

hates the traitor detective, and that's one thing in his favor."

Again the boy Vidocq ventured to look into the room. The scene had changed.

Dr. Otto was alone. He sat back in his chair, twisting his black mustache in a nervous manner, as if something perplexed him.

Billy Bantam saw that he was biting some of the dark hairs.

"They ought to get rid of the traitor!" he heard the doctor say. "They can't win while this man is in the game."

Dr. Otto came suddenly toward the window. A thrill passed through the boy's frame at the thought of discovery. He almost fell from the limb.

Looking up he saw the doctor standing just behind the glass, and but for the window, within arm's reach.

The young man looked handsomer than ever.

The woman had already passed out of the house and was gone, and the boy shadower dared not make the slightest movement. His life seemed to depend on lying perfectly quiet on the limb.

For a moment—it seemed an age—the eyes of the doctor seemed to regard him with an evil light.

Billy did not breathe.

"If I'm caught here," he thought, "Colonel Poynter will be at the mercy of the gang."

Suddenly Dr. Otto raised the sash and put out his hand. The heart of the boy detective came up in his throat.

He saw that dreaded hand move toward him, and, just when he was about to drop to the sidewalk and run the risk of crippling himself for life, it turned aside and closed one of the shutters.

"A miss is as good as a mile, they say!" muttered Billy, and then he left his dangerous perch and quitted the neighborhood as soon as possible.

CHAPTER V.

THE DETECTIVE WATCHED.

THE duplicity of the New Orleans detective no longer occupied a place in Billy Bantam's mind in the form of a doubt.

He had seen enough within the last few hours to satisfy himself that the fellow was an old hand at double-dealing, and he doubted not that he was deep in, if not at the head of, the conspiracy against Fergus Poynter.

Doctor Otto was also a member of the gang, though he hated the idea of being connected with a traitor, as he believed the Southern detective to be.

As the reader has not forgotten, the boy shadow promised old Mordecai that he would find, not only the person who had robbed the safe of the gold cross, but the cross itself.

He believed that the precious trinket had fallen into the hands of some member of the cabal, and he had gone to work at once.

Dr. Otto's words addressed to the woman had confirmed him in his opinions of Lynx. He would keep track of the wily rascal for a time, though he knew that it would be dangerous work.

When he left the doctor's window after his narrow escape, he made his way to a certain quarter of the city where he met a young man who greeted him cordially.

"What have you found out lately?" inquired the youth who was good-looking, well-dressed and about twenty.

Billy, who had taken a chair in the young man's plain lodging, removed his hat and crossed his legs.

"You're talking about the Poynter affair, I suppose?" he said.

"Of course," was the reply.

"Links are rather hard to pick up," remarked Billy cautiously.

"And how is the colonel?"

"No better."

"I wish he would let Doctor Otto see him."

The boy detective started.

"I don't want Doctor Otto to see him," he said with some emphasis.

"He has performed some wonderful cures."

"Yes."

"He is young and talented. He told me yesterday that he has made poisons and their properties a specialty. I have faith in him."

"Did you mention the colonel's case?"

"Yes; it came up during the conversation. Doctor Otto at once seemed to take great interest in it."

A strange smile appeared at the boy's lips.

"We won't call the World's Benefactor in just yet, Noah," he said to his companion.

"Colonel Poynter may pass beyond human aid."

"He says he will hold out until we've won the victory. You ought to see him."

"I should like to," answered Noah. "By the way, he never returned to the subject of the lost child, did he Billy?"

"Never," repeated the young detective. "That was the strangest thing I ever heard of. You haven't forgotten how it was, Noah?"

"Not entirely, but one has so many things to think of that he can't keep them all in his head at one time."

"It was just sundown and the room was nearly dark," began Billy Bantam. "I had come in from the street so noiselessly that Poynter, who appeared to be asleep in his chair, did not hear me. All at once I heard some one talking, and when I had listened a moment I knew it was the colonel. He was telling to an imaginary auditor the strangest story I ever listened to. It was about a child stolen from his father years ago, by the child's mother from whom the father had parted because the two could not agree. The woman risked her life to obtain possession of the child; she crossed a swollen river and walked for miles through a swampy forest, baffled half a dozen ferocious blood-hounds, and carried off the infant in triumph. For years Colonel Poynter searched for his child, but at last he became satisfied that both it and the mother were dead. Since then he has not prosecuted the hunt, and not long ago came on the other trouble which forced him to fight for the vindication of his honor against the most merciless secret gang man has ever dealt with. Such was, in substance, the singular narrative I heard from Poynter's own lips that night. He did not seem to realize that he had given away one of his secrets, for he showed no surprise when he discovered that I was in the room. Since then he has never talked on the subject, for, in truth, I have not seen him in that Trance-like condition since that hour."

Noah Natcher was a young clerk who was looked upon by Billy as the favored suitor of his sister Nanice, and he hoped that, at the proper time, the young couple would unite their fortunes in a matrimonial way.

The youth had little or nothing in a financial sense; but he had willingness and a courage to face the world, just the kind of man Billy would have chosen for his sister from among the many young men he knew.

"I want to see Colonel Poynter some time," said Noah at the end of Billy's narrative.

"You shall, Noah."

"Before he dies, too," insisted the future brother-in-law.

"Of course," nodded the Boy Beagle.

"I've taken an interest in him from what you have told me. In fact, I like him, and in this battle I'm on his side. We've just taken in a new lodger; that is, the landlady has. He is a tall southern-looking gentleman, and Mrs. Rotherham seemed to be acquainted with him. I think one of the boarders said he had been here before."

"What does he call himself?" queried Bill.

"I don't know."

"Tall and rather dark, eh?"

"Yes."

"Any beard?"

"He sports a mustache that droops over his mouth."

"That is Lemuel Lynx!" exclaimed the boy.

"When did he come?"

"He hasn't been gone an hour. He engaged the room just back of this one and went off. A young clerk who lived with Mrs. Rotherham a year ago said he was here then; but that he didn't stay long."

"I presume you don't know what he called himself then?" asked Billy.

"I think the clerk called him Mr. Lemuel, or some such name."

"Of course he has different flags in the chest, and he sails under the ones that suits him best."

"Who is he?"

"A fellow who needs watching. He is Poynter's detective."

"That man?"

"Yes; the colonel thinks so, at least."

"I shall watch him!"

"Not openly," exclaimed Billy. "Lemuel Lynx is shrewd. He has come back to his old boarding-house. By Jove! I'm glad you're under the same roof, Noah. You want to keep a record of when Mr. Lemuel comes and goes, what sort of visitors he has, if any; and, in short, you want to pick up all you can about him."

"I'll do that and be glad to," was the response.

"He isn't in just now. He left as soon as he

had engaged the room. I heard him in there a few moments. He changed some of the furniture, and seemed to be quite at home, which confirmed the other boarders' story that he had been here before, and was acquainted."

While they talked, a quick step was heard in the hall beyond the door, and Billy Bantam caught Noah's wrist.

"He's come back!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Lemuel, think you, Billy?"

"Yes."

The next moment they heard the sound of a key in a lock and then a door opened and shut. Somebody was in the room just beyond the right-hand wall!

Not for anything would Billy, the Boy Beagle, have been discovered by the tenant of the room, if he were Lemuel Lynx, the detective. Such a discovery would put the man on his guard, and probably defeat Poynter's hopes and his young champion's plans.

"There used to be a door between this room and that," whispered Noah, leaning suddenly toward Billy. "The place has been rather imperfectly changed. The bungling carpenters left a small opening where the transom was. It is hardly wide enough for the blade of a knife, but your sharp eyes might use it to advantage; that is, if you care to investigate."

"Show me the spot!" cried the boy detective, eagerly.

Noah picked up a chair, and carrying it across the room, put it down at a certain place.

"Get up on that and see for yourself," he said to Billy.

In a moment the boy shadow was on the chair and it was not long before he found the crack mentioned, and his eyes were at it and looking into the room beyond with all their eagerness.

It did not take him long to single out the man who had entered the apartment, for he was the only one to be seen.

He stood in the middle of the floor looking at something in the glare of the light above his head.

At times he held it out at arm's length, then he would bring it up for closer inspection. All the time he looked at it like a man proud of his victory.

Suddenly the man—it was Lemuel Lynx and no mistake—turned toward the table and laid the inspected object thereon.

Billy Bantam now directed his attention to it. The first look sent a thrill through him. He nearly fell from his chair, but kept back a cry; and when he got down, he caught Noah Natcher and cried:

"Colonel Poynter's gold cross is in there with that double-faced sleuth-hound!"

CHAPTER VI.

BILLY'S "NIGHTMARE."

"COLONEL POYNTER'S gold cross?" echoed the young man, staring at Billy. "What do you mean?"

"Ah! you don't know. I did not think of that," and then the boy detective told in a few hurried sentences the story of the cross which had been stolen from old Mordecai's safe.

"Do you think Mr. Lemuel is the thief?" queried Noah.

"I don't know that he is, but I do know that the man in there has the cross in his possession."

Without replying, Noah mounted the chair and placed his eye to the crack. In another moment he got down.

"What is he doing now?" eagerly inquired Billy.

"He is writing at the table."

"And the cross?"

"I didn't see it."

This was true, as the boy detective soon discovered. Lemuel Lynx was covering a piece of paper with writing, and was unconscious of the espionage to which he had subjected himself.

Billy and Noah took turns watching him until he had completed his task. Then they saw him take the cross from his pocket and place it beneath the carpet in one corner of the room.

"If he goes out it is ours!" exclaimed the boy Bantam; but the detective showed no signs of going away. He retired for the night, and was soon asleep on a low bed which stood within a few inches of the spot where he had hidden the cross.

"He won't be in his room all the time," said the Boy Beagle. "I don't have to look any further for the cross. I know where it is. I can go back to Poynter now."

He found his friend asleep in the arm-chair an hour later. The light was burning low, and Colonel Poynter seemed to have a ghastlier look than Billy had ever seen on his face before.

He stole forward on tiptoe and looked searchingly into the man's face.

All at once the Southerner put out his hands, and the boy drew back.

"He does not come!" said the man, in sepulchral tones. "I have waited these many years, but he comes not. A thousand curses on the head of the woman who plundered me. She was my wife, but what of that? I would have raised him in the path of honor and virtue. I would have made him an honor to the name he bore. But she would not. She came in the night and stole him from his cradle. If she is not dead, may the vengeance of Heaven overtake her for that crime!"

Colonel Poynter left his chair with the last words falling from his tongue. He stood erect before Billy Bantam, whom he did not see. The boy stood spellbound by his haggard appearance, and could not believe that he was clothed in his right mind.

"They think they have caught me in a death-trap!" suddenly continued Poynter. "Well, they have. I'm not the man I used to be. I have death in my veins now. I feel it there all the time. The poison I drank that night in my room is doing its work. Who made it? If I knew this, I'd force the antidote from its discoverer, or send him to the shades of eternal death. I must set my detective on this trail. I will put Lemuel Lynx on their track. He is the faithful sleuth-hound who has stood by me. Lemuel, where are you?"

A thrill of indignation passed over Billy's frame when he heard Lemuel Lynx thus eulogized by the man whom he had surely betrayed. He could hardly restrain himself from grasping Poynter's hand and telling him all; but he did not know what would be the effect of the truth upon the Southerner's sensitive nerves, and he did not speak.

Colonel Poynter, exhausted by the effort he had put forth, fell back into his chair with a deep sigh.

"Where is the boy?" he asked. "I have a friend in the little fellow who works so hard for me."

He shut his eyes and became quiet. Billy stole to the door, opened and shut it with some noise, and came back to his friend.

"Back, eh?" smiled the sick man, extending his hand. "I'm glad you've come."

He did not know that the boy detective had been near him all the time, that he had heard his strange words and had watched him like a hawk during their utterance.

"Did you see Mr. Lynx anywhere?" queried Poynter.

Again the revelation, destined to come some time, trembled on Billy's tongue, but again he held it back.

"No," thought he. "Not yet. I want to watch the gang awhile longer. I want to see how far Lemuel Lynx will go."

Billy adroitly evaded Poynter's question and left him under the impression that he had not seen the New Orleans shadow.

"Mr. Lynx will strike the trail," resumed Poynter. "He is the only man of the many who did not fleece me. He is faithful among the faithless. You must trust Mr. Lynx, Billy. He and you may work together against the common enemy; and with two such heads in the same cause there can be no failure."

Billy smiled. He work with Lemuel Lynx? The thought was absurd! He was working against him even then, for he had seen the man in his true garb, and he knew that Colonel Poynter had taken a viper into his confidence.

It was a peculiar habit of Poynter's to sleep in his chair. He said he could obtain better rest that way, and Billy was not surprised to see him fall asleep shortly after his sudden question.

When the boy slept in Poynter's lodgings it was on a cot in one corner, and when he found that his friend was sound asleep in his chair he sought the cot and lay down. He wanted to think out a new plan for the hunt he had before him. He wanted a chance to think deeply and quietly about Dr. Otto, Lemuel Lynx, the strange woman and one or two other people.

He turned the light lower, or until Colonel Poynter's form was barely discernible, and for some time he watched his friend while he laid his plans.

In spite of his efforts to keep awake Billy Bantam fell asleep on the cot. With his face turned toward Poynter he slept soundly for two hours.

When he opened his eyes the light seemed to have gone out entirely, but he finally discovered that a spark still remained.

But what had become of Colonel Poynter?

Billy Bantam lay quiet and looked toward that spot where he had last seen the Southerner in his chair.

Suddenly he observed that he could see more than he had been seeing, and then he noticed that this was caused by an object, which had been between him and the chair, moving to one side.

In another second the boy detective saw a woman in the room.

How and when she had entered he did not know. It was very plain that she was there.

Billy's first impulse was to lie still, but when he saw the woman bend over Colonel Poynter, now visible in his chair, he left the cot.

In doing so he made a slight noise, and in an instant the woman turned.

She leaned toward the boy detective and then came forward with a sudden step. She towered like a giantess before Billy who seemed to be riveted to the floor.

No word escaped the lips of the unknown. Her hand darting forward landed under the young shadow's chin and closed there like a turtle's mouth.

In a second everything grew dark to the gamin Vidocq. The accursed grip seemed to sink into his throat; he tried to loosen it with his hands but in vain. He might as well have tried to break the cables of some great bridge. He was at the woman's mercy!

Some time afterward Billy Bantam found himself wandering through the shadows of a deserted square. He could not tell how he came there. He had no recollection of quitting Colonel Poynter's lodgings. He was hatless and barefooted and there was a confused feeling in his head.

By degrees the adventure we have just described came back to the boy. He recalled it point by point until he could put the whole together and see everything just as it had occurred.

"I must go back!" thought Billy. "Something may have happened to Poynter. There is no telling what a woman of that stripe might not do. I must have escaped from the house in a delirium of some kind. She is worse than Jezebel!"

He left the square at once. His head now seemed clear but there was a suggestive soreness at his throat.

He let no grass grow under his feet between the park and the old lodgings. He ran up-stairs with the fleetness of a young acrobat and burst open the door leading into the colonel's room.

Instead of finding his friend dead or missing, for either sight he was prepared, he saw him leaning back in his chair breathing like a person whose sleep has not been broken for a long time.

Billy stopped amazed in the middle of the room.

He could hardly believe the evidence of sight.

"Was it a nightmare?" he asked himself. "Was I dreaming? No! this tells me that it was real," he put his hand up to his throat. "People don't get choked in dreams. But the wonder is that the colonel is alive in his chair."

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

COLONEL POYNTER was not disturbed by the boy detective's return. He seemed to have no knowledge of the visit to his quarters of the mysterious woman who had administered such a severe choking to Billy Bantam.

The boy was astounded. He could not believe that such things could occur without waking the victim of the gang; but by and by he was forced to admit that Poynter was totally unconscious of the whole proceeding.

This was confirmed when the Southerner awoke.

He told Billy that he felt stronger and better than he had felt for some time. There seemed to be new life in his system; he believed he could walk out and enjoy the bracing air in the park.

"Shall I tell him?" thought Billy. "He might laugh at me, and I have nothing to show for my tussle with the unknown woman whose face I could not see for the poor light in the room—nothing but a sore throat, and it might not convince him. No; I'll keep my secret. I'll know more one of these days. The mystery will be cleared up before long. I've made several important discoveries of late. I know where the cross is, and I have seen Lemuel Lynx in his true garb."

The next morning the Boy Beagle found himself back in Noah's lodgings. The young man said that the new boarder, Lemuel Lynx, had

already left the house, and Billy at once proposed an invasion of his apartments.

"We mustn't be caught," admonished Noah.

"Of course not," was the response. "Lemuel Lynx doesn't know that we are friends, therefore, if he loses the cross, he won't suspicion you. I've no doubt that the prize is where he put it last night under the carpet in the corner."

Billy took Noah's key and slipped to the door which opened into the detective's room. In another moment he had admitted himself, and springing across the carpet, knelt over the important spot.

Lifting the corner of the carpet with his eager fingers, the gamin detective of New York felt for the cross, but touched nothing! A look of blank disappointment overspread his face.

"I see!" exclaimed Billy. "Mr. Lynx hides the cross only while he sleeps. When he is on the war-path, he carries it with him. I might have suspected this."

He restored the carpet to its place and went back to Noah.

"The detective is sharp enough, Noah," he smiled. "If we would despoil him we must do it when he is at home."

Noah Natcher drew back at the suggestion.

"It can't be done then!" he exclaimed.

"Lemuel Lynx, as you call him, probably sleeps like a cat, and the slightest noise would disturb him."

"But the cross has to go back to its owner!" persisted Billy.

"I'm with you there. I want to see Colonel Poynter win the game against the gang. I'm willing to help him all I can; but I don't want to make a bad play at the start."

"You mean that you don't want to make an attempt to rob the traitor-detective and fail?"

"That is it."

The failure to find the pawned cross where he had seen it hid, rather nettled Billy Bantam. Lemuel Lynx had come into possession of the bauble in a manner unknown to the young detective. He might have robbed the pawnbroker's safe, but it was not likely. Billy was inclined to think that he had received the cross from the real burglar, and he already believed that it was an important card in the game against Poynter.

When he left Noah he sought out his sister Nanice, to whom he related his singular adventures. The young girl listened with her usual attention. The visit of the strange woman to Poynter's abode interested her most.

"Your friend, the colonel, ought not to be kept in the dark," said Nanice. "He ought to know that Lemuel Lynx is playing a double game—that he is in league with those who are against him. Doctor Otto is in the conspiracy, too; but how deep no one knows. I can't see what they expect to accomplish now. Poynter has spent his fortune. He has been unable to run down the villains who broke him up by their villainies. He has been fleeced by every detective whom he has employed. He trusts too much. See how he clings to Lemuel Lynx. A greater scoundrel than he I believe does not exist!"

"They want Colonel Poynter out of the way," exclaimed Billy. "The secret poison is doing its work, but they seem to fear that it may fail, or that he will keep his oath and live long enough to bring them to justice. A strange idea has entered my head since I saw the unknown woman in the room."

"Well?"

"His wife may not be dead."

"But he says she is, I understand."

"He believes so. Remember, the only times I heard him speak of his wife and child were when he seemed to be in a half trance—when he talked like a man under the influence of a spell of some kind. There is a woman in this game against him. I have seen her with Lemuel Lynx and the other man."

"Who is the other man?"

"I have found out but little about him. I have tracked him over one half of the city, him and his friend. I have caught them watching me many times, but have eluded them as often. Now, Nanice, what is your final decision? Would you lay the whole story before Fergus Poynter?"

"I would," said the girl, firmly and promptly. "I think it is wrong to keep him in the dark concerning the man who is playing double."

"I'll do it, come what may!" cried Billy Bantam. "Inside of an hour the colonel shall know the whole story; I won't keep anything back. I'll tell the story of the stolen cross, and how I have followed two trails—the one above and the one under ground."

Nanice smiled her approval, and eager to

carry out his resolutions, the boy detective took his departure.

He went straight to Fergus Poynter's lodgings. During the journey he revolved the whole thing in his mind, and knew just where and how he would begin.

But a startling surprise was in store for the boy.

When he opened the door and stepped into the little room, he halted and gave utterance to an exclamation of astonishment.

Poynter was not there!

The chair which he had seen occupied day and night was empty; the cot in the corner, too, was untenanted.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed Billy, rushing forward.

The table standing near the chair did not solve the mystery. It contained no explanation of Poynter's absence.

Suddenly the boy detective recollected that his friend had remarked that he felt strong enough to walk to the square near by and enjoy the morning air.

Had he gone thither?

In another moment Billy was bounding down the steps toward the sidewalk. He ran to the square unable to control his excitement.

The morning was cool and bracing, and the benches were already well taken up by all sorts of people. Billy went from one to another in search of Colonel Poynter. He looked everywhere and let nothing escape him.

The object of his solicitude was not in sight. The marked Southerner had disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed him.

"He can't be far," said the young searcher to himself when he had looked the square over the third time, scanning every face closely. "He hasn't the physical strength for a long journey," and he continued to look for Poynter, extending his search to the territory surrounding the square.

But it was all for nothing.

He inquired of a dozen policemen concerning his friend, but they had not seen him. He went back to the house and prosecuted his search still further in that vicinity. Nobody had seen Poynter quit the place. It was very strange.

At the last moment the boy detective picked up what promised to be a faint clew.

He found a street Arab of his own age who had seen a man enter a carriage a square from the house. The gamin's description of the person gave Billy some hope. Had Colonel Poynter been carried off? Had he ordered the carriage and gone somewhere to play a card of his own against the gang he was fighting?

Billy Bantam was inclined to say "no" to the last question.

"He would have left some word for me—a note on the table or something of the sort!" exclaimed he. "Some evil has befallen Fergus Poynter! The gang is playing a bold hand. Lemuel Lynx did not come to New York for nothing!"

In the solitude of the deserted room the young shadow went carefully over the whole mystery.

"I'm alone against the gang now," thought he. "Poynter has fallen into the power of his enemies. They won't spare him. First the cross disappears, then the man himself. Where shall I start in? What shall I do next?"

No wonder the boy detective was perplexed. He rejected twenty plans as fast as they suggested themselves.

"I must do something!" he cried at last. "I can't sit here and rescue Fergus Poynter. Every moment is precious. The gang is at work. I must go to work, too!"

Five minutes afterward he was on the street.

"I'll go back to the underground trail; it may yield something," said he.

He boarded a passing car and ensconced himself in one corner.

At the next street a man entered and took a seat nearly opposite him. Billy felt his blood tingle in his finger ends as he looked at the last passenger, for he was no less a personage than Dr Otto.

In a moment his adventure in the tree at the doctor's window came back to the boy detective, and as the car moved on, he fell to watching the "World's Benefactor," and to wondering whither he was bound.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE HANDS OF THE PHILISTINES.

DR. OTTO was a young man with a dark though good-looking face, a well-shaped figure and to all appearances very much of a gentleman. He exchanged nods with several people who happened to know him and then settled back as if for a long ride.

Billy's presence in the car seemed gave no him uneasiness; indeed he barely noticed the boy, so that the young detective could study him without interruption.

The car jogged along square after square until Billy and the doctor were the only ones left in it of the many who were passengers when the two commenced their journey.

At last Dr. Otto got up and moved toward the door.

"I'll give him a little rope," murmured the boy shadow. "To start after him at once might render him suspicious. I can't afford to lose the game now."

The doctor was on the sidewalk when Billy left the car, but a second later he disappeared round a corner and vanished.

Master Bantam showed a good deal of agility in the next movement made by himself. He turned the corner in time to see a figure whisk out of sight beyond a certain door which, when he reached the spot, he found shut and probably locked.

The building entered by Dr. Otto was a large, three-story affair. Alongside the door hung a sign bearing the words: "Doctor Dalrymple." It was a new sign, and the letters were as bright as polished gold.

Not caring to be caught spying in that particular spot, Billy did not tarry there. He saw and read the sign in a moment, as it were, and passed on down the street. He could not help laughing at the manner of Dr. Otto's disappearance.

"He's a sleek one," thought Billy. "I don't see that I've gained anything by this bit of business, so I'll go back to the underground trail."

Just then there sounded a footstep behind him. He turned in time to see a man about to pass him, and an upward look at the face made his nerves tingle.

It was Dr. Otto, but disguised.

Ten minutes had barely elapsed since he had lost the doctor in the three-story house, and here he was again, not in the same feathers, but for all this the same bird.

He wondered if Dr. Dalrymple and Dr. Otto weren't one and the same person.

In an instant all thought of the "underground trail" left Billy Bantam's mind. He went back to his old business; he shadowed the doctor.

It was not a long chase this time.

Dr. Otto rung a bell a few blocks from the spot where the boy encountered him the second time, and was admitted by a man. The young Beagle caught a glimpse of the face of this person, then the door was shut, and Dr. Otto was lost again.

These incidents did not take up much time. Billy approached the house and noted the number above the door.

It was 410 R— street, and in a locality not exactly renowned as the abode of honest people. He did not care to hang about the place, waiting for the doctor's reappearance, but he was anxious to know what was going on inside.

It seemed to him that the young Cure-All had come to the place in connection with the mystery surrounding Colonel Poynter.

The house, as Billy soon observed, happened to be flanked by an alley. This was suggestive and in a short time the boy ferret was scaling the fence at the rear of the building and dropped into the back yard without injury.

He now saw before him a small arbor covered by a luxuriant vine, and beyond this the glimmer of a light in a basement window. The young spy of New York crept forward, took further observations from the depths of the arbor and went on again.

He was on dangerous ground and he knew it. A misstep, or the slightest noise might precipitate a disaster and the whole game be lost.

The window, beyond which gleamed the light he had discovered, was not but a few steps distant.

The boy reached it without accident and ventured to look in.

In a second the light disappeared and all was dark!

Billy Bantam drew back alarmed. Had he been discovered with all his caution? He could not think otherwise.

For several minutes he stood in the dark as motionless as a statue and barely breathing. To move an inch might be to court capture if not worse.

All at once the boy heard a sound which, slight as it was, seemed to still his fluttering heart.

A door had opened within arm's reach on his right! The boy was now sure that some one stood very near him. It seemed to him that he could make out the outlines of a man in the doorway, that he was seen by that person and

that the slightest movement on his part would end the adventure.

"Here goes!" mentally ejaculated Billy Bantam. "I can't remain here under the eagle eye in the doorway," and he moved toward the arbor.

His start seemed a signal for the person on guard. In another moment a dark object darted toward the boy and in spite of his attempt to clear the arbor and reach the fence a hand closed on his arm and he was lifted off his feet.

The grip of his captor appeared to crush Billy's arm, but he did not cry out.

"Into the hands of the Philistines!" thought he. "This is what I get for following Doctor Otto when the underground trail deserved the most attention."

He did not offer much resistance—what was the use?—for he was carried toward the house and taken inside almost before he got second breath.

Up to this time his captor had said nothing. He seemed to be harboring his voice for some future occasion.

In a little while Billy was thrown half-way across a room into a deep, old-fashioned chair. At the same time the dim light grew brighter, and he saw not one man, but two.

"There he is!" cried the one who had captured him. "I knew I wasn't mistaken. You can't fool me very often. I know the ways of these gutter rats. That's the king of 'em!"

Billy glanced from the speaker to the person addressed, and in an instant knew that he had encountered Dr. Otto again.

Nor was his captor an entire stranger.

He was the man whom he had seen with the unknown woman and Lemuel Lynx in a certain house on another occasion, the same person whom he had tracked half over the city, and one of the chief members of the gang playing a dark hand against Fergus Poynter.

Billy did not fear Dr. Otto, but he did fear the man who had caught him playing spy.

"Leave him with me," said the young doctor. "To get away?" was the quick retort. "He's a rat, I tell you, and so long as we—"

A look from Dr. Otto checked the speaker, and with a mad look at Billy he sullenly withdrew.

For a few seconds the boy and the doctor looked at one another without a word between them, Billy from the chair into which he had fallen, and the doctor from the table near which he was seated.

"What were you doing out yonder?" asked Dr. Otto, at last nodding toward the window.

"You know what he said I was up to," answered the boy detective, referring to the man who had just left.

"Do you deny it?"

There was nothing harsh about Dr. Otto. His voice was soft and musical, and as he uttered his last words he crossed the little space between them.

"I thought I had a right to be out there," answered Billy.

"Thought you had, eh?"

"Yes."

The young doctor appeared taken aback by Billy's frankness.

"Then you were playing spy!" he exclaimed.

"For whom, boy?"

"What if I should say for myself?"

Dr. Otto smiled.

"I wouldn't believe you," he replied. "Boys don't play spy for themselves."

"They don't, eh? That shows that you have yet something to learn. I'm my own master."

"Come!" laughed the doctor-conspirator. "You can't afford to play a hand of that sort against me—can't afford to, I say, my young man."

At the same time he moved around in front of Billy and took one of his hands in his. His touch was moist and gentle. It seemed to send an irresistible thrill through the young detective's frame.

At first he thought of leaping from the chair and rushing toward the door; but in a short time he realized that such a thing was impossible.

The eyes of Dr. Otto were fixed upon him, not madly nor in a stare, but with a singular fascinating softness that could not be withstood.

A feeling of gradual surrender to a peculiar influence stole over the boy, as though Dr. Otto was exercising a potent charm.

Billy tried his best to shake the feeling off, but in vain. He no longer possessed the power to quit his chair. One resolution went after another and at last Dr. Otto became an indistinct figure and finally faded altogether.

Billy Bantam was in the power of a mesmerist.

CHAPTER IX.

A STUBBORN RAT.

SOME time passed before the boy detective came back to consciousness.

At first he could not recall anything that had happened, but the last event came back at length and he remembered his capture by the strange man and his interview with Dr. Otto.

Billy found himself lying on a pallet near a wall. He could not tell how long he had occupied it, but he knew that the night had passed, for daylight pervaded the little apartment whose furniture consisted of one rickety chair.

The solitary window of the place was small and beyond his reach. It was crossed by two bars of iron which he knew, without trying them, would resist his strength.

"I'll see what is beyond this prison!" exclaimed Billy, dragging the chair to a spot beneath the window.

In another minute he was standing on tiptoe on the chair, and gazing out upon innumerable roofs and chimneys.

He looked a long time before he got down.

"In a trap!" thought he. "Doctor Otto seems to be no better than the rest of them. If I could have resisted him, I might not be here now; but I was powerless. He's a dangerous man because of his power. What if Colonel Poynter falls into his hands?"

Thoughts of Poynter and of his mysterious disappearance seemed to send the boy's blood leaping through his veins. What had become of the victim of the gang? Did Lemuel Lynx, the double-face detective, assist in his vanishment? Had Poynter become the prisoner of the enemies he had hunted so long, the people who had reduced him from wealth to poverty?

There seemed no way out of the trap into which Billy's eagerness had got him. The door was locked from the outside, and the window offered no avenue of escape.

The only hope appeared to lie in the mercy of his jailer, whoever he was.

"I'll get a glimpse of him when my breakfast is brought, for surely they don't intend to starve me," said the young Vidocq to himself.

He was compelled to wait for a long time for a noise which sounded like a footstep. Billy thought it would never come.

He held his breath when the step sounded at the door.

"I shall see him now! Will it be Doctor Otto or the other man?"

A key turned in the lock with a grating sound. Billy stepped back.

All at once the door opened and a man entered.

"Hello! up already?" he laughed, at sight of the boy in the trap.

"Of course I am," replied Billy. "What would make me sleep in this place?"

His words were followed by a contemptuous look around the room.

"It's no palace, that's a fact," remarked the man, who carried a frugal breakfast on a pewter tray. "I guess you wouldn't be here if you had your choice."

Billy, who was looking at his jailer, made no response. He had never seen the man before, but he did not doubt that he belonged to the league against Poynter.

He was a middle-aged man, with a well-knit frame, a dark face and dangerous-looking hands. Billy felt that an appeal to him would amount to nothing.

"Do you belong to the game?" suddenly asked the boy detective.

"To what game?"

"Innocence!" laughed Billy derisively.

The man seemed to frown.

"I've nothing more to say. I see you know your lesson well."

"See here! I want no insolence. I didn't come here to listen to anything of the kind."

As he finished, the man put the tray on the floor and came toward the victim of the trap.

Billy retreated to the chair which he placed between his jailer and himself. He believed that he could use it as a weapon of defense should the man offer any violence; but he was not driven to this point, for his jailer stopped short and burst into a laugh.

"Eat your breakfast," said he, turning away. "I don't quarrel with boys. But you can't afford to be troublesome. You've got too much at stake."

In another moment the door opened and shut and his jailer was gone.

Too much at stake! Billy could not eat for a while for thinking of these words. Yes he had a good deal at stake; but why should the man remind him of it?

An hour later the door opened again, and

the dark-faced man came. Billy thought his eyes had a softer look, that the face was not as harsh as it had been.

He took the tray away without exchanging words with the little prisoner, and the young detective was alone again.

He could tell by the shadows thrown by the iron bars at the window that the day was waning. He watched the sunbeams as they flitted across the floor, and thought a thousand times of Colonel Poynter, Nanice and Noah.

The afternoon was nearly gone when he heard more footsteps at the door. There were voices there, too.

The boy sprung from the pallet where he had been busy with his thoughts the whole day, and watched the door.

"Ah! the unknown woman!" he mentally exclaimed, and as a masked female came in he recalled his brief struggle with Poynter's visitor in the Southerner's lodgings.

The door shut behind the woman, whose face was concealed by a black velvet mask, with openings for the eyes.

"How do you like it here?" asked a voice behind the velvet.

"You ought to know that," answered the boy.

"Do you want to get out?"

There was a taunt in the woman's tones.

"You can get out," she went on. "You don't have to perish here, but it all lies with you."

"Of course I want to get out," said Billy. "I was brought to this place without my consent. I did nothing to merit punishment of this sort."

"Nothing?" repeated the Unknown. "You were playing spy."

"I was performing a duty."

"For him?"

"For whom?"

"Come! concealment is unnecessary. You were spying for the Southerner."

"I was working on my own hook."

"Helping him at the same time, though."

"There was no answer."

"Let us see if you really want to get out of here," continued the woman. "Where does he keep his papers?"

Billy started, although he more than half-expected such a question.

"What papers?" he queried, assuming an air of ignorance.

"You know! This is no child's game, Master Bantam," rejoined the woman, sternly. "The man you serve has concealed certain papers whose whereabouts are known to you. The revelation of their hiding-place shall be your passport to liberty."

The boy detective looked indignantly at the speaker.

"You take me for a traitor!" cried he.

"Don't you think you've made a mistake?"

It seemed to Billy that the face behind the mask got scarlet, for the eyes flashed.

"I think you value life and liberty," was the response.

"You don't want to perish like a rat in a trap."

"That's just what I am now."

"Nothing more nor less. Fergus Poynter cannot reward you for your services. The man is bankrupt. He hasn't a dollar which he can call his own."

"What's become of him?"

The question came from the Boy Beagle without an effort.

The masked creature seemed to recoil.

"That's a queer question to put to me," she replied.

"I don't know that it is."

"Is he really missing?"

"He is gone."

"Since when?"

"Since last night."

The eyes behind the velvet certainly twinkled. "I am dealing with a person who knows more than she will tell," thought Billy.

"If your friend is missing, he is likely to remain so," she suddenly said. "His disappearance ought to dissolve your connections. Let me have the hidden papers, and you walk from this room, free. Don't say that you know nothing about them. We know better. The papers which Fergus Poynter drew up some months ago he intrusted to you. You carried them away and hid them. The man himself has betrayed you!"

"Colonel Poynter?"

"Colonel Poynter!"

Billy Bantam was dumfounded.

"Did I startle you?" laughed the woman.

"I don't believe it! I won't believe that there is a drop of treacherous blood in the colonel's veins. What! betray the papers which contain

the story of his life, his long hunt, and all his suspicions? Impossible!"

"Would you know his handwriting?"

"Yes. There is nothing like it that I've ever seen."

Billy's visitor took from her pocket a piece of paper which was the conclusion of a document, for the top part had been torn off, leaving several lines and a signature.

"Here, then. Whose hand wrote that?" cried she, handing the paper to the boy.

One look sent every vestige of color from the young detective's cheeks. He knew that a pair of eager eyes were watching him while he read the lines, which ran as follows:

"The boy known as Billy Bantam knows where the papers are, and I am willing to have him give them up."

FERGUS POYNTER.

"What do you say now?" asked the woman.

"Didn't he write that?"

"I think he did, but—"

"But what?"

"By Jupiter! I won't go back on him yet!"

"Then die in the trap!" was the response.

CHAPTER X.

BETRAYING HIMSELF.

"THERE'S a mystery about this!" exclaimed the prisoner of the strange room when once more he found himself alone, the masked woman having departed immediately after her last recorded words. "That handwriting has all the looks of Colonel Poynter's, but why would he write thus? To save his life? He told me once—the night he gave me the sealed packet of papers—that on no account, should I reveal their hiding-place. They may have forced the letter from him by threats. I don't know. I took the chances of disobeying him, and heard the woman say that I could die in this trap for my stubbornness. Whether I do or not, remains to be seen."

Let us go back a step and keep track of the masked woman. Let us see if, by following her, we cannot penetrate the mystery surrounding Fergus Poynter.

Before she was out of the house she removed her mask, revealing a resolute but not handsome face.

"I thought I would find him stubborn. I told them so!" she exclaimed. "We've got to play another card, for this one won't win. He might send a peremptory command to the boy, but I doubt if that would move him. We'll get them, however. When I am backed in this game, by a boy—a street rat—I'll go to the river and never return!"

This woman took a car to help her to her destination which was a certain house many squares from Billy Bantam's trap.

She was met beyond the door by a man who looked very much like Dr. Otto.

"Well!" said this person at sight of her.

The woman laughed.

"I failed!" she exclaimed. "The rat showed his little teeth and they are sharp, too."

"What! wouldn't he give up the papers?"

"No."

"Perhaps you did not go far enough with him."

"I showed him the fragment of the document."

"What did he say to it?"

"He did not dispute its genuineness."

"But still refused?"

"Yes."

"What did you say then?"

"I told him to stay where he was and die like a rat in a trap!"

Before the woman's questioner could reply, she bent forward and caught his wrist.

"How is he now?" she asked, in a whisper.

The man glanced toward a door at one side of the room.

"He's asleep," he answered. "Have you tried your power since?"

"I have not."

"Are you sure he sleeps?"

"Yes. Come and see."

The couple approached the door on tiptoe and the man—Dr. Otto—opened it softly.

Beyond the step deep shadows lay, showing that heavy curtains excluded nearly every particle of light. A little gas-jet burning with a bluish flame dimly revealed the appointments of the room.

The woman leaned forward with an eager face.

Near the middle of the apartment stood an old-fashioned cushioned chair. It had an occupant.

"He is asleep sure enough!" she whispered

with a hasty look at her companion. "How he seems to have failed within the last few hours!"

"Very much, I think," replied Dr. Otto. "But his vitality is wonderful."

"He always had a constitution of iron," smiled the woman.

The man in the chair was our old acquaintance, Fergus Poynter whose whereabouts were such a puzzle to Billy Bantam. He lay back like one exhausted, his skeleton hands resting on the arm of the chair, and his eyes closed in slumber.

For ten minutes the woman feasted her eyes upon this pitiable spectacle—pitiable because Poynter looked like a dying man whose every breath might be his last. She exhibited no signs of pity; on the contrary, the sight seemed to give her secret delight.

All at once she turned to Dr. Otto and touched his arm.

"Is he very hard to put under the influence?" she asked.

"Yes. There's a good deal of resistance in him."

"You must try again. The next time he may tell us more."

The doctor shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," said he. "It was with the greatest difficulty that I got him to write what he did. I don't think he knows what the papers are."

"But won't you try him once more?"

"I will. When he comes out of his sleep, if he happens to be in proper condition, I will mesmerize him again."

The two now left Colonel Poynter alone in the darkened room, and retired to another part of the house where the woman related her experience with the boy detective.

At the conclusion of the narrative, they were joined by a stalwart man, who at once addressed the woman.

"I see failure in your eyes, Marcia," said he. "The boy was too much for you."

She smiled, but not pleasantly.

"Why didn't you wring his neck?" the man continued.

"It wouldn't have done."

"By Jove! it's a good thing I didn't go in your place!"

"I'm glad you didn't."

"So's the boy, no doubt."

"I have just told the doctor to mesmerize him again," replied the woman.

"And get nothing better, eh?" laughed the big man. "Lemuel Lynx is now at work. Leave it to him, I say. If the boy won't give the papers up, Lynx will find them. I know him. He is sharper than the sharpest. If we can't do any better, we'll let the rat escape."

"Let him escape?" cried Marcia.

"Yes. He'll be likely to go straight to the papers. This is Lynx's plan, if he doesn't hit the trail presently."

"I don't like it," rejoined the woman. "The boy is shrewd. He suspects. He might go straight to the police."

Dr. Otto started at the word "police."

"Better keep the boy where he is—for the present," he put in. "We want no risks beyond the ones already taken."

The big man smiled half contemptuously. He was a thoroughbred villain, a man willing to take any risks that offered to benefit the game he was playing.

An hour later Dr. Otto stole into Colonel Poynter's room and found him wide awake.

He greeted the sick man pleasantly, and after a few moments fixed upon him the look which had fascinated Billy Bantam.

But he soon discovered that he had a more stubborn subject to deal with, still he exerted all his powers, and at last had the Southerner in his power.

He drew a small table up to Poynter's chair and went to work.

"You must give me the boy's residence," said he. "I can't find him, though he has been hunted for high and low. Where does he live?"

Colonel Poynter shook his head.

"Think," persisted Dr. Otto. "At one time or another he must have told you about his home."

The man in the chair seemed to reflect. To all appearances he was wide awake and in full possession of his senses; but he was under the weird influence exerted by the young doctor.

"Once," said he, finally; "once I remember the boy said something about a girl called Nanice, and a friend named Noah. He also said something concerning a street—an alley, rather—which he called Bottle Alley."

"Do you think Nanice lives there?"

"I don't know."

"Or Noah, perhaps?"
 "I cannot say."
 Again and again Dr. Otto returned to the attack, but he could get no further clew.
 "It is something," he muttered. "Bottle Alley. Nanice or Noah may be a starting-point. It will be something for Lynx—a clew perhaps. If he is 'sharper than the sharpest,' as was said a while ago, he may get to the mark by help of the three words I've picked up."
 Dr. Otto now permitted Colonel Poynter to come out of the trance-like state in which he had followed his (the doctor's) will, and with a deep sigh the Southerner sunk back in his chair and wearily turned his head away.
 Out in the other room he suddenly encountered a man who had been waiting some time for him.
 It was Lemuel Lynx, the New Orleans detective.
 Dr. Otto gave the double-faced Vidocq the results of his experiments with Poynter.
 "Thanks, doctor," replied Lynx, with a smile. "You've caught something by this cast of the net. I know where Bottle Alley is, and I think I can find both Nanice and Noah."

CHAPTER XI.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

NOAH NATCHER, Billy Bantam's friend and Nanice's lover, became alarmed as the hours passed and did not bring the young detective back.

He feared that the boy had fallen into the clutches of those whom he was watching, and his fears increased as the day drew to a close.

It was near dusk when Noah, on the eve of seeking Nanice, in hopes of learning something through her, heard a step approach his door, and then a rap saluted his ears.

"Come in," said Noah, in response, and the next moment Lemuel Lynx, the detective, stood before him.

Noah was surprised by this visit from his fellow-boarder, and could not imagine what it meant. But his first glimpse of the Crescent City shadow put him on his guard, and he resolved to be cautious.

Lemuel Lynx greeted Noah pleasantly and said, with a soft smile, and an oily tongue, that he was a fellow-boarder, and that he had dropped in for the purpose of becoming acquainted.

"Pretty sleek," thought Noah. "I'll have to mind my p's and q's if this thoroughpaced rascal don't get ahead of me."

The young clerk told Mr. Lynx that he was glad to see him, that he had become aware of his being his fellow-boarder, and that he hoped he would find the house to his liking and remain with them a long time.

"I already like the place," replied the detective. "Mrs. Rotherham and I are old friends. We shall get along pleasantly together, I assure you."

Then the two fell into a conversation commonplace enough on the face of it, but all the time the detective was leading up the object of his call.

"Speaking of street boys," said he, "I recall a sprightly little fellow whom I met during my former visit to the city. He was worth remembering. I am now in a position to make something out of the boy. He called himself Billy Bantam—a queer name, and one which I've thought of a thousand times since."

Noah saw the speaker shrewdly watching him, and he took good care not to betray himself by a start at mention of his friend's name.

"You see a good deal of these street Arabs, don't you?" queried Lemuel Lynx.

"Yes, a good deal," echoed Noah.

"I presume you have met my little acquaintance."

"It is not unlikely. I am a poor hand to recall faces, or recollect names."

"Indeed?"

It seemed to Noah that the detective suspected him of playing a secret hand.

"Billy and I became quite familiar," Mr. Lynx proceeded. "I think he had a friend whom he called Nanice."

In spite of his resolve Noah started. He felt that he had betrayed himself; he was conscious of having blushed, and of having been seen to do so by the New Orleans shadow.

"I don't know," said he, hastening to remedy the evil. "I'm afraid you'll have to look elsewhere for Billy Bantam and the girl called Nanice."

Mr. Lynx replied in insinuating tones that he was sorry. He had hoped that Noah could give him some information. He would now have to abandon all hopes of meeting Billy Bantam again; he might run across him on the street,

but that was not a likely chance, one hardly to be thought of.

Noah was glad when his visitor took his departure. He was afraid that he would betray himself the second time, and when his door had closed behind Lemuel Lynx's figure, he administered to himself a good lecture.

But this was not all he did.

The detective's visit had increased his fears concerning Billy. He felt that Lynx's questions hid a deep plot against the boy. Nanice ought to be put on her guard. The schemer might visit her next, especially since he knew that she existed.

Noah put on his hat and went out. He did not see the man watching for him near the house, nor did he know that the sharp eyes of Lemuel Lynx were following him up one street and down another.

Noah took the shortest path to Nanice's house. The detective tracked him to the door and waited until he came out again.

"I've warned her," said Noah to himself. "I did it without the knowledge of Mr. Lemuel Lynx, too. Nanice believes that a plot exists against Billy as well as against Colonel Poynter. We must get ahead of these rascals. They will stoop to anything, and that is why they need watching. Mr. Lynx did not know that I know a good deal about him; that I am aware of his double-dealing; that I have seen the gold cross in his possession."

Noah went home feeling that he had, to some extent, counteracted his mistake of a short time before. He had warned Nanice, and that was something.

Lemuel Lynx did not follow him back.

The detective had scored a victory which he smiled over. He had found Nanice without much trouble; he had frightened Noah to the girl, and if she was Billy's friend, it was more than likely that he had hidden the papers in her house.

He waited for night to take his next step.

He met the big man whom we saw last at Dr. Otto's, and told him that the trail had become hot, and that he expected to report good news before long.

"I knew you would!" exclaimed the big man. "I told Mordecai and the doctor so. What have you found?"

"I've discovered Nanice."

"She has the papers, eh?"

"I think so."

"If you think so that settles it."

The boy detective's sister occupied a small room in the house whose side ran along a part of Bottle Alley. Nanice had deft fingers, and they made her a fair living. Noah had helped her some and she sometimes had little outings which kept her in good health and spirits.

She had been troubled by her lover's call and by the story he had to tell. She believed that some great danger impended, and when Noah went away she locked her doors and resolved to open them to no one.

The girl took her sewing away from the window at which she usually sat. She was afraid to sit in the old place.

Night came, and the hours of darkness began to pass. She thought Billy might come, but Noah's story had filled her with many fears concerning him.

All at once a strange sound broke the stillness that reigned in the little room.

Nanice's fingers stopped suddenly, and she felt afraid to look up. It seemed to her that she would see some one should she do so.

The sound was not repeated, and after a few moments the girl ventured to glance at the window.

The following second a cry parted her lips.

There was a face there! It was the face of a man, and was pressed against the pane, the eyes watching her like a hawk's, full of evil darkness.

Poor Nanice did not know what to do. The face at the window seemed to possess some weird powers of fascination.

At last she left her chair and tottered forward; but all at once her strength seemed to give way, and she sunk to the floor in a swoon!

The terror of the face had unnerved the girl; it had won a silent victory for its possessor.

For a few seconds after Nanice's swooning the evil countenance remained at the window, then it suddenly disappeared as if it had left the girl to her fate.

Ten minutes later a man entered the sewing-chamber. He turned the light down and bent over Nanice. She had not stirred once since sinking to the floor.

"She'll come out of it bravely," muttered the man. "I did not know she could be frightened

so easily. Never mind. Everything is working right. I can work unmolested now."

He left the girl and began to search the room. He looked everywhere, through the bureau that occupied one corner, under the edges of the carpet, behind the few pictures on the walls and even into the little cot along the chair-board.

"Not here!" said he. "The boy either did not make the girl his *confidante*, or he hid the papers elsewhere. We must let the rat out of the trap and follow him to the prize. I see no other way to it."

He looked at Nanice again and withdrew. He had tried to replace everything he touched, and when he went away he thought he had left behind no traces of his visit.

But the eager eyes of Nanice, when she came out of her swoon, saw that he had been in the room. With a quick cry she thrust one hand into her bosom.

"Thank God!" she cried. "I have them yet! He did not think of looking here for Fergus Poynter's precious papers!"

CHAPTER XII.

BILLY'S FORTUNES TURN.

AS the hours passed bringing him no liberty, Billy Bantam felt more and more like a rat condemned to die in the trap that has caught it.

He saw the day fade by the movements of the shadows on the floor, and when night came again he feared that it was the first of many of the kind to come.

What had become of Colonel Poynter? Did Noah suspect that he (Billy) had fallen into the hands of the gang? Would Nanice be able to keep the papers against the schemes that would be laid for their capture? Was everything lost?

These were the mental questions that met the boy detective at every turn. No thoughts could dismiss them, and he was well-nigh in despair.

He did not seek the pallet on the floor until he had revolved and dismissed a hundred plans, one after another.

He heard a clock in the neighborhood strike ten before he retired to the darkness of the corner and shut his eyes.

After a short sleep the young Vidocq found himself wide awake. He could not tell what had roused him, but he was sure something had broken his slumber.

He got up and crossed the room. A portion of the floor was covered with moonlight. It reached to the door, and to Billy's astonishment, showed him that the portal was an inch ajar!

It then occurred to him that some one had visited him, and had accidentally left the door open on retiring.

Had fortune provided an avenue of escape?

Billy Bantam was prompt to take advantage of the situation. He would not stop to inquire into the whys and wherefores of the changed fortunes. It was his duty to accept it without question.

He opened the door noiselessly and stole away. He found a broad staircase beyond the portal, and descended cautiously.

This didn't look like dying like a rat in a trap.

Billy reached a door at the foot of the steps. He knew that it must communicate with the street, so he turned the knob, and passed out.

He was free!

The long lighted street was before him; it had never looked so beautiful before.

A backward glance at his prison showed Billy that he had been imprisoned in a tall structure with the figures "929" above the door.

But he stopped to see no more.

A square from the house he paused to collect his thoughts.

"I'll look into the colonel's lodgings first," said he. "After that, maybe I'll hunt up Nanice, or Noah."

He went back to the Southerner's late abode. He stole into the little room where he was accustomed to seeing Poynter and found it empty.

Poynter had not come back.

Billy was about to quit the place when the door opened.

"Noah!" cried the boy detective springing forward.

"Billy!"

The two youths stood face to face for a moment with hands clasped, and joy in every lineament.

"They're on the trail!" said Noah, the first of the pair to speak.

"On whose trail?"

"Yours."

"What! do they know that I've escaped?"

"I can't say about that; but Lemuel Lynx called on me and asked many questions about you."

"When?"

"About dusk."

"What did he want to know?"

"He was anxious to find out where you lived."

"Ah! they want the papers?" cried Billy.

"What papers?"

"The story of Poynter's life. I was offered my liberty for the papers. The woman of the game showed me a piece of writing from the colonel saying that I had his permission to give them up; but I would not. Then I was told to die like a rat in a trap; but I don't intend to do any such thing. So Lemuel Lynx wants to find out where I live? He wants to find Nanice!"

Noah and Billy discussed the whole situation in Colonel Poynter's room. The young clerk told the boy that he had come to the house in hopes of finding him so as to put him on track of Lynx's schemes, and that finding him there was the greatest of surprises.

They agreed to watch the double-faced detective, since they believed that he knew where Poynter was, and would, in time, lead them to the Southerner. They would also watch Dr. Otto, the unknown woman, and the big man, for all four were in the game against Poynter.

Billy said it would not be wise to go to Nanice just then, as they might be watched, and he seemed to have a strong motive for staying away from the girl.

"If there's any one on our trail now, we'll throw them off," he said to Noah. "I want to show you something besides. Come!"

Instead of quitting the house by the front door, the two friends left it by a back entrance and started off.

Billy conducted Noah into a certain dark little alley, where he opened a gate and entered a house with the aid of a key.

Noah wondered whether he was leading him.

The boy detective descended to a musty cellar, the door of which he closed and bolted. Then he struck a match and took several stones from the wall. Noah looked on amazed.

"It won't soil your clothes much, Noah," smiled Billy, pointing to the opening thus revealed. "I've been here before, and Poynter has wondered at the dirt on my clothes."

The young shadow crawled into the hole and was followed by Noah, though not without some misgivings.

"Halt!" said Billy's voice in the dark.

The next instant a light flashed up.

"This is the underground trail," explained Billy, looking at his companion and seeing the look of wonder that filled his eyes.

"The underground trail?" repeated Noah.

"Yes."

"Whose underground trail is it?"

"I'll show you."

The two friends advanced again.

"Don't think I'm taking you across the city," Noah heard Billy say at last. "I'm doing nothing of the sort, though the way seems long because it is dark. Here is where I picked up one of my first links. Listen."

Noah felt a hand encircle his wrist and hold it steady.

"They're not here now," continued Billy. "At least I cannot hear them."

A moment afterward he found a rope in the dark, and pulled it downward toward him.

A trap-door overhead opened slowly.

"Let us go up," said he, and in a little while the boys stood in a comfortably furnished room, the windows of which were both shuttered and curtained.

"Here is where they came to talk over their schemes against Poynter," explained the boy detective. "I've heard the whole gang here but Lemuel Lynx. I discovered the underground trail some time ago, and it has been of a good deal of service to me. They don't come here as often as they used to. They have other places—Dr. Otto's house and the like."

Noah expressed his astonishment while Billy went on to tell him how he had overheard the conspirators in that very room, he being underground, the words coming down to him through the floor.

"They would hardly fetch the colonel to this house, even if he has fallen into their hands," resumed Billy. "It isn't very secure as a jail, and that's why I think he isn't here."

In order to make sure that the missing Southerner was not in the house, the friends searched it thoroughly, Billy Bantam leading the way.

When they had finished their search back to the trap, passed through the underground corridor, and emerged upon the street once more.

"We must solve this mystery, and that soon," exclaimed the boy detective. "Colonel Poynter is in the shadow of death. He knows he cannot recover from the work of the fatal draught which he unwittingly took that night some months ago. He must be rescued from those who have entrapped him, for I am now convinced that he has fallen into the power of the gang."

"I am with you Billy," answered Noah, resolutely. "The more I see of Lemuel Lynx the more I despise him."

"A greater traitor never lived!" replied Billy. "It is a pity that Poynter ever met him, for Lynx has become his evil genius."

The two friends heard the clocks striking one. "I shall go back," said Noah. "Lemuel Lynx may need watching, and I want a clew to Colonel Poynter's fate."

Billy watched Noah out of sight. He saw his figure fade gradually in the distance, and then he turned away.

He went back to Poynter's lodgings again. He could pass the rest of the night there on his old pallet.

Casting himself upon it, the boy detective of New York went back over the adventures which had befallen him.

His corner was dark, but other parts of the room were not equally so.

While yet awake the door opened, and Billy saw a figure, gigantic in its proportions, enter the room.

There was something desperately fierce in the aspect of his visitor.

All at once the man crossed the room to Colonel Poynter's arm-chair, drew a knife and slit the cushion from back to front. Then he thrust his hand into the gasb, and withdrew it empty, a curse announcing his ill success.

"You won't find 'em there!" chuckled Billy Bantam. "It's a cold trail you're on now."

CHAPTER XIII.

A SCENE AT DOCTOR OTTO'S.

OF course the boy on the pallet in the corner did not move until the man had taken his departure.

He watched him from the moment of his entering the room until he had closed the door behind him.

Billy had cause for remembering him, for he was the person who had caught and dragged him into the presence of Dr. Otto, by whom, as we have seen, he was thrown into a mesmeric slumber.

He did not want to fall back into the stalwart fellow's clutches. He had just escaped from a trap with which the man had doubtless had to do, and recapture might put an end to his (Billy's) hopes and plans.

The cutting of the chair told him that Colonel Poynter's papers were still objects of pursuit by the gang, and he was glad to know that they were still safe. Of course he did not know how near Nanice had been to losing them.

In hopes of getting a clew to Poynter's whereabouts, the boy shadow of New York followed the big man down-stairs.

He saw him walk to a corner, where he was joined by another person, and the two proceeded on together.

An hour later Billy saw the big one enter Dr. Otto's house.

"Is he in there?" asked the boy. "Have I found Poynter at last! If I have we will bring this game to an end, for if we don't, the gang, reinforced by the New Orleans detective, will finish him suddenly."

Billy remained "on guard" in a secluded spot until morning. His desire to find a clew to his friend overmastered every other one, but his hopes seemed destined to be dashed to earth unsatisfied.

No one came out of the doctor's house during his watch, and the door did not open to admit a single person.

If he could have entered the place he would have witnessed several scenes that would have given him new courage.

Dr. Otto was alone when the big man came in. The "World's Benefactor" occupied a seat at a small table in the center of a room whose shelves and bottles told that it was his private office.

He was so busy at work over some chemical apparatus that he did not hear the man, and for a time he was closely watched by a pair of hawk-like eyes.

Suddenly the big man stepped forward, and Dr. Otto heard him.

The next instant their eyes met.

"Nothing yet?" growled the visitor, a frown darkening his face.

"That is what Mr. Lynx says," answered the young doctor.

"He does, eh? What did he do?"

"He visited the girl's room. He went to Nanice's lodgings and searched them thoroughly."

"Where was the girl at the time?"

"On the floor in a swoon."

"And he found nothing?"

"Nothing!" repeated Dr. Otto.

The big man was silent for a moment.

"It beats all!" he exclaimed. "Where is Marcia?"

"I don't know."

"On the hunt, too?"

"I think so."

"It is aggravating to be baffled by a boy. He knows where the documents are. Colonel Poynter intrusted them to him for safe-keeping. If he did not take them to the girl, heaven knows where they are. We tried the other scheme. We left the door of the rat-trap open, and the boy walked out. He went straight to Poynter's old quarters, and gave us the slip by going out by the back way. He is sleeker than the sleekiest."

Dr. Otto smiled.

"I could have told you that the boy is shrewd," cried he.

The large man looked around the room.

"What does he say?" he suddenly queried.

"The colonel?"

"Yes."

"But little," answered Dr. Otto.

"Where is he?"

"In the other room."

"Asleep?"

"Doubtless; he sleeps a good deal."

"I believe I'll take a look at him."

"Be careful," admonished the young doctor, as his visitor withdrew.

As he did not follow the big man, he did not see him tip-toe into a room adjoining the laboratory and stand over a man who was sleeping in an arm-chair.

It was Colonel Poynter.

A smile illumed the watcher's face while he looked.

"Why doesn't he come back?" suddenly fell from Poynter's lips. "My boy must be a young man now. His mother—a thousand curses upon her head!—should have repented long ago. Isn't her hand still against me? Who has brought me to death's door, and whose hand gave me the fatal draught? But I will live to win the battle! I am not alone. I have a famous sleuth-hound on the trail—the only one of all who has proved faithful. Thank fortune for Lemuel Lynx!"

It took the big man some time to discover that Fergus Poynter was not wide-awake while he spoke. He probably knew nothing of the strange talking trances into which he sometimes fell, and he looked at the man amazed while he heard him through.

At the end of the Southerner's speech he left the room and went back to Dr. Otto.

"He looks better!" was his exclamation as he crossed the threshold.

"Do you think so?" was the reply.

"I do. He has a better color. His face looks fuller and his voice seems a trifle stronger."

"Did you converse with him?"

"No; he talked in his sleep."

"About what?"

"It was a rambling speech; nothing connected," replied the big man, cautiously.

Dr. Otto turned toward his table, but in an instant the hand of his visitor darting forward closed on his arm.

"Say, isn't he getting better?" he asked, the question seeming to draw fire from his eyes.

"You seem to think he is."

"He looks that way, I say. You don't want to carry your experiments too far."

"What do you mean?" cried Dr. Otto, shaking off the grip and springing to his feet.

"Do I speak in riddles?" was the quick response. "I warn you not to carry your experiments too far. You don't want to make him too strong. I know what you can do."

Dr. Otto did not answer.

He looked at the big man with a sort of defiant light in his eyes, in spite of the physical difference between them.

"You are as deep in the game as any of us," his caller went on. "You are a member of the league against the man in the other room. You—I need not recall your work in the game. You know what it has been, and now if you attempt to counteract it with the secret powers at your command—"

The threatful speech was broken at this juncture by the opening of the door.

"Heavens!" cried the big man. "The colonel himself!"

He fell back and stared at the person who had come upon the scene. His face was colorless and his eyes had a frightened look.

Fergus Poynter looked like one in the grasp of death. His tall figure had the spareness of an Indian arrow; his flesh had shrunk to his bones; his eyes were wild in look and deeply set—in short, he was enough to terrify the man with a giant's frame.

Dr. Otto went forward and took Poynter's hand.

"Who is he?" suddenly cried the Southerner, breaking from the touch and confronting the big fellow. "I've seen that face before, but where? The years have changed it. Time has given it a devil's countenance. Ah! I see! I see! Basil Porterham!"

As the name rung from Poynter's throat he made a wild dash at the doctor's visitor, and before that person could lift a hand in self-defense, he was caught by the throat and borne back among the shelves.

"I've longed a thousand times for a chance like this!" continued Poynter. "You were seen about the plantation the night my wife came back and stole my child from the cradle. Your hand was in the conspiracy to blight my name and to wreck my life! I wish I had the power of an iron vise. I'd like to grip your coward throat until death came."

The big man struggled to free himself from the clutch of the skeleton hands which seemed to possess a demon's power. In doing so he brought down a shelf of bottles. The crash was loud enough to be heard in the street beyond the room. The fall of this singular avalanche broke the Southerner's hold, and the large man sprung away free.

"Now I'll return the compliment," he cried, advancing upon Poynter; but Dr. Otto came between and met him with unflinching gaze.

"Not now," said the young doctor, sternly. "It is your fault; you should not have let him see you."

The big man's face became scarlet. "Are you his champion?" cried he. "Have you turned traitor?"

"Never mind. This is no place for scenes of this sort. There is one infamous double-face in the game, and that ought to be enough," and, unawed by Basil Porterham's look—it was the look of a tiger—Dr. Otto led Colonel Poynter from the room.

"I see through his plot!" exclaimed a voice behind him. "From this time on the game passes swiftly to its end!"

CHAPTER XIV.

OVERHEARD.

THE next day Billy Bantam became aware that he was watched. More than once he discovered a pair of eyes on the alert, and several times he found himself dogged by a certain man who seemed resolved not to lose sight of him.

This person was one whom he had seen in the same business before—the big man's companion, not the big man himself.

The boy detective had been unable to pick up any clue to Colonel Poynter's whereabouts. He managed to meet Noah clandestinely, when the fox had been outwitted by some clever doubling, but the young clerk could give him no information.

At nightfall Billy went secretly to Nanice and heard from her lips the story of her fright. The girl thought the papers safe while they were secreted on her person, but the boy was not of the same notion.

"Noah shall lock them up in the safe at the store," said he. "They'll be safe there. I could get Mordecai Moses to put them under lock and key, but I wouldn't trust the old fellow. I'll make Noah the keeper of the records," which he did that very night.

For some time Billy had seen nothing of Lemuel Lynx, but when he was returning from Noah's, with the papers out of his possession once more, he nearly ran plump against that individual, apparently waiting for some person among the benches of a square which he was crossing.

Curious to know what had called the New Orleans detective to the spot, Billy Bantam drew off, and began to watch. In a short time a female figure came toward Mr. Lynx, and a moment later the two were seated together.

"That's the viperess of the game," said Billy to himself. "She's got a grip like a steel vise. I ought to know, for I've felt it. She is Colonel Poynter's bitter enemy, and I've nearly figured out her identity."

He watched the woman closely while he communed thus with himself.

She was dressed in plain black, and though possessing a good figure, was not handsome.

The pair were conversing in low and earnest tones, and Billy, eager to catch the run of their conversation, approached them from the rear.

"Hello, there!" suddenly rung out a voice. "Did you ever find the man you was hunting?"

Billy turned and saw the speaker within a few feet of him. He was a ragged street gamin, and the very boy who had once given him a mite of information concerning Poynter's disappearance.

The boy detective felt like pouncing upon the gamin like a young eagle.

"Needn't look so mad at a feller," continued the youngster. "I don't know that you're any better than the rest of us just because you're in with Colonel What's-his-name."

In another moment Billy was at the speaker's side, and his fingers encircled his wrist before he could withdraw.

"I'll see you later, Dick Mallett," he whispered. "You've nearly spoiled a game for me."

Master Mallett was inclined to be resentful; but Billy, all the while leading him away, talked to him in a strain which overcame the difficulty.

When he had got shut of the gamin, he went back to look for Lemuel Lynx and the woman, Marcia—but both were gone!

Whether they had taken alarm from Dick Mallett's interference, or had finished their talk, he had no means of knowing; he only knew that they were no longer where last seen, and the disappointment was most keenly felt.

"I owe you one, Mr. Mallett," said Billy, at the height of his chagrin. "I'll pay you back with interest one of these days. I had two birds in the hand, a while ago, and now they're in the bush once more."

Half an hour later who should he spy but Lemuel Lynx again!

This time the double-faced detective had picked up another companion—the big man whom Billy had last seen enter Dr. Otto's house.

"As pretty a pair of hawks as I ever saw!" exclaimed Billy. "If there's an honest drop of blood in their veins, it must feel awful lonely."

He saw the two talk earnestly for a time, saw something that glittered pass from Lynx to Basil Porterham, and the pair separated.

"Was that the gold cross?" the boy asked himself. "Has the trinket passed from the New Orleans detective to the New York rascal? It looked very much like the cross from the glimpse I had of it. I'll follow you, Mr. Giant, and see!"

This time Basil Porterham did not lead the boy trailer to the young doctor's. He took him on a longer journey to a house which he recognized with a start.

"I'll go back to the underground trail!" exclaimed Billy, withdrawing. "It promises to help me a little again."

He was soon creeping through the dark passage to which he had conducted Noah some time before, and ere long he stood beneath the trap-door listening with all his might.

At first he heard nothing; then a hum of voices.

"He has the strength of a tiger yet," he heard a voice say. "One would not think it from his looks, but he has. By Jove! if the bottles had not rattled down upon me when they did, I don't know what might have happened."

"What did the doctor do?"

"Stood there and said nothing."

"That was strange."

"The man has turned on us."

"Impossible!"

"I say it is true! A look at the colonel as he now is will convince you. He's got a better look. What does it mean, eh? I'll tell you. Doctor Otto is experimenting with his so-called elixir of life."

A short silence followed, and the heart of the boy in the dark beneath the house seemed to beat as it had never beat before.

"Does Marcia suspect this?" was the question that broke the stillness.

"Not yet. She has not seen him for some hours. Doctor Otto cannot afford to play a double game."

"Not with us! Did you mention your suspicions to the ferret?"

"To Lynx? I did."

"Well?"

"It did not astonish him."

"Had he already suspected?"

"He seems to have suspected something. He gave me the cross."

"Ah! have you got it with you?"

"It is here."

Although Billy Bantam could not see the speakers, he could imagine that Colonel Poynter's cross was produced after the last words. He was not mistaken.

"He kept it to the last," said the big man's voice. "He did not part with it until starvation stared him in the face. Then, as you know, he sent the boy to old Mordecai's and got something on it. No wonder he wanted to keep it. It was found in the cradle the night he lost his son—how long ago, Marley?"

"Twenty years ago to-morrow night."

"So it is! He's kept the cross all this time."

"And the boy?"

"Slipped through his wife's fingers after the event," was the reply.

"Do you think he's dead, Basil?"

"No! He'll turn up to plague Marcia one of these days," laughed Basil Porterham. "I'm sure of it. That boy isn't dead. Colonel Poynter believed so once, but he doesn't any more. You ought to hear him talk in his sleep as I have. Vengeance and love for that son are what have kept him alive so long. But for these two things, he would have died long ago. You know what his oath is, eh?"

"To live until he has vindicated his name?"

"That's it; and until he has paid us back; ha! ha!"

The coarse laugh set every nerve in Billy Bantam's frame a-tingle with indignation.

"I'm going to see that he does live until that time, you infamous scoundrels!" cried he, clenching his fists in the dark. "The old underground trail has given me the very clue I've been looking for. I'll give odds that I can go straight to Poynter at last. In Doctor Otto's charge, is he? Well, he may not remain there long. The doctor hates a traitor; I've heard him say so. He doesn't like a hair on Lemuel Lynx's head; and he may have taken pity on the victim of the gang."

A few minutes later the two men showed signs of quitting the room above the boy ferret; but Billy did not stir until they had taken their departure, and then he crept back through the old tunnel and out upon the street, saying to himself that fortune was smiling upon him at last in "dead earnest."

He was the happiest boy in New York.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TALE OF A BUTTON.

THE next morning Billy, fast asleep on the cot in Colonel Poynter's lodgings, to which he had gone for a short rest after his successful work against the league, was roused by a hand at his shoulder.

It was the hand of Noah, and the blanched face of the young clerk sent a thrill of fear through the boy detective.

"We had a catastrophe at the store last night, or rather this morning," began Noah.

Billy guessed the rest in an instant.

"The safe was robbed, was it?" he cried.

"It was robbed!"

For a moment the young Beagle could not respond. He looked at Noah in a dazed manner, and felt that he must be as white as a sheet.

Noah had said nothing about the loss, but it was not necessary. He knew what had been taken. Of course the precious papers which he had taken from Nanice to the safe for safer keeping had disappeared, which meant that they had fallen into the hands of Poynter's enemies.

"Go on, Noah," he said at last. "I've got to hear it all some time, and I know of no better time than the present."

Noah went on to say that the safe of the store with which he was connected in the capacity of clerk had been burglarized and successfully plundered; that a few hundred of dollars had been taken. He said that the proprietors were glad it was no worse; that they knew nothing of the depositing of the papers in the safe, and that they were not aware of the real motive of the robbers.

As Noah finished he took from one of his pockets something wrapped in tissue paper, and Billy saw him open the little packet with burning curiosity.

When the paper had been removed a coat button was revealed and Noah held it toward the boy detective while his eyes got an amused twinkle.

"Do you know it?" asked the clerk.

Billy Bantam took the button and leaned toward the light.

"Where did you get it?" he queried, looking suddenly at his companion.

"I picked it up in the store near the window where the burglar effected an entrance."

It was a rubber button of a shape peculiar enough to compel one to recognize it who had ever seen it before.

"Do they know you have the button, Noah?"

"No."

"I think we have a clew," smiled Billy.

"Then, you have seen such a button before?"

"I have. A few nights ago I had a good look at a certain gentleman, and as I had nothing else to do, I took him in from head to foot at my leisure. I was close enough to see the buttons on his coat; they were like this one."

"Thank fortune!" exclaimed Noah.

"Exactly like it," continued Billy, turning the button over and over. "The bits of thread clinging to your find tell me that it was torn off."

"Yes. I think I could show you the nail that did the work."

"When we match this button we have the man who stole Poynter's record," resumed the young detective.

"That is plain, unless there be many buttons like it worn in New York."

"There may be ten thousand for that matter," was the reply, "but only one man wore it last night. Did you ever see Mr. Basil Porterham and his friend?"

"The big man, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"I don't know him."

"Nor his friend?"

"Nor his friend."

"The friend is smaller than Basil. He is as wiry as a cat, just the fellow to crack a safe and—to leave a button behind."

"Then you suspect him?" exclaimed Noah.

"Basil Porterham's friend is the man whose buttons I counted half a dozen times while I watched him. He has followed me quite often since I became connected with Colonel Poynter's fortunes. He is the trail-dog of the gang."

"What is his name?"

"Basil sometimes calls him Morley, and a man by that name was Colonel Poynter's overseer when he was living in the South."

"How came the colonel to tell you so?"

"He has told me much about his past," rejoined Billy. "But what is the matter, Noah? You are agitated. Did you ever hear of Morley before now?"

"The name brings something back to me," answered the young clerk.

"What is it?"

"You know that my early life is a blank to me?"

"Yes."

"I have been my own father, as it were, since my tenth year. Before that time I lived with a man in this city who was a great mystery. I knew he was not my parent. I have no recollection of any guardian before him. One day, as I may have told you before, Billy, this man went off and never returned. I afterward discovered, one of our neighbors told me, that he had been arrested and taken to another State for trial. I waited a long time for his return, for he had not been unkind to me, and I had no other home. During the interval several letters came to the place for him and were given to me."

"I kept them in trust for him, for I thought he would come back some day; but I never saw him afterward. Young as I was, I was compelled to go out into the world and make a living. I took the letters with me—there were three of them—and they remained unopened for a year. All were addressed to 'Sylvester Solon,' but inside they began 'My dear Morley.' Each one contained ten dollars, to be expended, the writer said, 'for the comfort of your charge,' which certainly meant me. I remember reading the letters over time and again. They were all signed 'M,' and appeared to have been written by a woman. I thought I had a right to the money and kept it. It gave me a start; it put me above the first round of the ladder, though I'm not very high up yet. This is why I must have started when you mentioned the name of Morley. The old letters came back to me. I have them still, and I believe now, as I did then, that 'Morley,' whoever he was, knew the secret of my birth."

"There may be two Morleys," replied Billy Bantam. "Did you ever hear what they did with your guardian?"

"I never heard; I don't know whether he was innocent or guilty. He went away and that was the last of him."

The boy detective was silent for a few moments.

"We'll look after the Morley of the present," he said with a smile. "He may turn out to be an interesting subject to you, Noah."

"He is that already!" cried the young clerk. "The name has brought my boyhood back, and I am eager to go to the end of the button's trail with you."

Billy then detailed his adventures since separating from Noah; how he had gone back to the underground corridor and overheard the important conversation between Basil Porterham and his companion. He believed, he said, that Colonel Poynter was a prisoner in Dr. Otto's house; that, from what he had heard Basil say, he was in no immediate danger there, and he thought it best to look after the stolen papers, especially since the name of Morley had been invested with new interest.

The button was returned to its paper and handed back to Noah.

"I might lose it," added the young ferret with a smile. "There's no telling what may occur. I've been in one trap; I've had the hand of the woman, Marcia, Colonel Poynter's enemy, at my throat, and the gang is desperate and cunning. Keep the button, Noah. I think I know where to look for its late owner; and the papers won't be far away when I've found him. They want them above all things. I believe that Poynter has written out the innermost secrets of his life. He intended the papers to bear witness against his enemies in case they carried out their infamous plot. The woman is at the bottom of the whole affair. She has a drawn Basil Porterham, Morley, Doctor Otto and Lemuel Lynx into the scheme, and a prettier set of scoundrels this big city never harbored."

"Who is the woman?" asked Noah. "Why does she hate Colonel Poynter?"

"Ah! that is, in part, a mystery," answered Billy. "I think we would have to go back many years to get at the beginning. It'll all be unraveled some time. If Poynter's life holds out—if he can fight the secret draught long enough, and if success attends our efforts in his behalf—we'll solve the puzzle."

Not long afterward Noah was reminded by a look at his watch that he was expected at the store—his vacation having ended that morning—and Billy was left alone.

"Here's a go, sure enough!" he exclaimed. "They've got both Poynter and the documents. The gang has played another bold hand, and a successful one at that. Noah must have been watched. He must have been seen to deposit the papers in the safe. Morley is the burglar of the plot. He is the man who stole the gold cross from old Mordecai's shop; there's no doubt of it now—and his fingers were at work again last night. Now, let me see what I can do. A breakfast first, and then for the trail of the button."

Ten minutes later Billy the Beagle was the occupant of a cozy corner of a cheap restaurant—which he sometimes patronized. He had given his modest order, and was waiting to be served, when a man took a chair at the nearest table, and threw a quick glance toward him.

Billy's heart seemed to find its way into his throat.

"Why! I didn't know you at first sight!" exclaimed the man, leaning toward the boy ferret. "Where have you been keeping yourself; and what took my friend, Colonel Poynter, out of town so suddenly?"

The young detective could not repress a start; it was impossible.

"Out of town?" he repeated, staring at the speaker.

"Yes, yes. I've called several times to report, but the colonel wasn't in."

"That may be true," Billy looked straight at the man as he spoke. "Colonel Poynter hasn't left the city, Mr. Lynx. He'll turn up all right yet. And don't you forget it!"

CHAPTER XVI.

FREED.

BILLY BANTAM'S answer seemed to take Lemuel Lynx's breath.

He fell back and looked—half-stared—curiously at the boy, as if he had not heard aright; but Billy's face confirmed his words.

"I hope he may, indeed I do," said the detective, coming to his own rescue as best he knew how. "You are aware that I came up from the South to help Colonel Poynter—that I was called North by telegram?"

"I know that," replied the boy, and then he turned questioner:

"It's a pretty deep case, isn't it, Mr. Lynx?"

"Well, yes. In fact, I may say that it's very deep; rather mixed, too; but we'll come out with flying colors in the end."

"You may not," thought Billy, though he did not speak. "There's liable to be a slip or two between cup and lip. I wonder what you'd say if I were to tell what I know? But I won't; not to-day, Lemuel Lynx; nor here."

It happened that the boy's order came at this moment, and he turned his attention to his breakfast. He knew that Lemuel Lynx was eying him like a hawk, but he seemed to take no notice of the espionage and devoted his whole attention to the food before him.

The detective took a cup of coffee and a roll, both of which he soon finished; and as he pushed his chair back, he cast a look toward the young detective.

"Should Mr. Poynter come back to the old place, I wish you'd notify me," said he, at the same time hastily scribbling an address on a bit of card-board.

Billy glanced at the directions and saw that Lemuel Lynx had given him the number of Noah's boarding-house.

"I shall be glad to oblige you," rejoined the boy; and the next moment Lynx stalked toward the door, leaving him to the enjoyment of his corner.

"Yes, I'll tell you!" pursued Billy, but in different tones. "What do you take me for, Lemuel Lynx? I'm no chump, if I am somewhat green. I guess you know that I'm in for the war. You couldn't hoodwink me with your pretensions. You saw me come in here, and you thought you'd catch a gudgeon."

Some little time elapsed before Billy passed to the sidewalk. When he got there he looked all around for Lemuel Lynx, but that worthy had disappeared.

"A visit to Nanice first," muttered the boy. "I've got something to say to her. She hasn't heard of the robbery of the safe, and I don't know that I'll tell her just yet, for she thought the papers would be safer with her, which is right."

By doubling adroitly, as he knew how, the boy detective of New York soon stood in his sister's presence.

"Nanice," he began, "did Noah ever tell you about his boyhood?"

"There never was much for him to tell," smiled the girl.

"But he has told you?"

"Yes."

"About the three letters addressed to Sylvester Solon on the outside, but to 'Morley' within?"

"About them, Billy. I have seen the letters."

"When were they dated, Nanice?"

The girl had a remarkable memory; names and dates rarely slipped away from her.

"One bore date May 10th, 1872."

"Twelve years ago."

"A little over," corrected Nanice. "The other letters were dated the same year; the first sometime in June, the second in August."

"From what place were they written?"

"They mentioned no place."

"But the postmark?"

"That was too dim to be deciphered."

"Was it the same on all three envelopes?"

"Yes."

"Noah thinks they came from a woman."

"I think so, too," said the girl quickly.

"Now," resumed Billy, crossing his legs and putting on an air of importance. "Those letters are connected with the secret of Noah's life."

Nanice gave Billy a curious look, and he thought he detected a gleam of merriment in her eye.

"You think so, too, Nanice!" he exclaimed.

"Your eyes give you away."

"Do they?" laughed the girl. "Then let me tell you what I have kept from Noah. Those letters came from his mother!"

"Heavens!" cried the young detective almost leaping from his chair.

"Don't you think so, too?" queried the girl, calmly. "Haven't you had just such an idea in your head a dozen times since Noah told you?"

Billy confessed that he had.

"I thought so!" continued Nanice. "I don't know what Noah thinks, but this belief flashed across my mind before I had finished the second letter."

"His mother!" repeated Billy several times. "It's all clear enough now. Sylvester Solon must have been in prison, else he would have come back to Noah."

"It looks that way."

"He went away suddenly, you know?"

"And they told Noah that officers had taken him to another State for trial."

"So they did. And that's why he didn't come back. Maybe he went up for a long term, and when he came back Noah was gone."

The girl thought so, too.
"Noah wants to keep his letters, continued the boy ferret. "They may prove something one of these days. Now, I'm going back."
"Back to the Poynter trail?"
"Yes."

Night descending again over the spires of Gotham, saw the slight figure of the boy detective creeping through the shadows of the house. The place seemed deserted, for the shutters were drawn, but if he had thought it was not inhabited Billy Bantam would not have been there.

He halted at the foot of a tree which grew at the edge of the sidewalk and stretched its branches toward the house.

In a short time he was ascending the tree and, in spite of his perilous adventure in the same vicinity on another occasion he crept out on one of the boughs toward the window.

Several minutes later he was looking into a room occupied by two men. A number of jars and bottles on shelves told him that it was an office, or laboratory; but the men before him told him more.

Dr. Otto was there; but he was not the person whom the boy detective watched.

He saw a face which he knew better than the doctor's. He saw a man lying back in an arm-chair just as he had seen Colonel Poynter do a thousand times; and, what was more, the person before him was the colonel himself!

Billy could hardly keep back a cry at his discovery.

He looked into his friend's face with more curiosity than he had ever regarded it before.

"By Jove! he looks better!" he exclaimed. "He's stepped back from death's door. I know he has. His eyes are brighter. What is the doctor going to do?"

His question was prompted by the strange actions of Dr. Otto.

He saw him unseal a bluish bottle and then dip into its narrow mouth the end of a singular-looking instrument with a rubber tube attached. At the same time the skeleton hands of Colonel Poynter bared his bosom, and the young doctor, bending forward, seemed to put some of the contents of the bottle into his system.

The boy ferret watched the operation with an interest impossible to describe. He saw a new light fill Poynter's eyes as if the fluid was instantaneous in its effects, and he thought he heard an audible "Thank you!" from the patient's lips.

"Doctor Otto may not be all scoundrel," said Billy to himself. "He is doing the colonel a service from what I can see; but, after all, he may be hastening the end."

At that moment a slight noise beneath him attracted the young beagle's attention.

The sidewalk was one-half in shadow, and Billy parted the leaves noiselessly with his hands.

At first he saw nothing, but a closer look showed him a dark figure against the body of the tree.

"A spy!" thought Billy Bantam. "I'm not the only one playing a hand in the game to-night."

By this time his eyes, accustomed to the vague light, showed him more.

He saw that the man was tall and of stalwart build, and that he was looking up into the tree as if he had already found him.

"Basil Porterham!" ejaculated Billy. "I don't want to fall into your clutches now!"

CHAPTER XVII.

NOT A MOMENT TO LOSE.

THE presence of the big man under the tree was enough to alarm the boy shadow.

There could be no mistake, it was Basil Porterham.

Billy at first thought he had been discovered, but a little scrutiny gave him hope. The man seemed to be watching the house, and not him.

A few seconds later another man joined Basil on the sidewalk.

This person was smaller, and the young fox in the tree recognized him also.

Morley had joined his fellow-plotter.

"The man who lost the button!" mentally ejaculated the boy. "I'd like to look at your coat, Mr. Morley; but time enough for that. Maybe you've sewed on another button, or changed garments. Now, what are you two rascals going to do?"

It was evident that the two men were up to something dark.

Billy, as we know, had overheard Basil Porterham say that Dr. Otto was playing a double hand—that he was trying to give Colonel Poynter new strength, if not to restore him alto-

gether, and this, of course, the gang did not want done.

The boy detective watched them as he had never watched any one before.

They held their consultation in low whispers, with their heads close together. The young ferret could not make out a word. Once or twice he saw them look up at the window where there was a light, and he feared that Morley, being the slightest in weight, would ascend the tree for closer inspection.

At last the men separated. They moved noiselessly toward the door and let themselves in by means of a night-key which Porterham produced.

The secrecy of their movement suggested some new villainy and caused Billy Bantam to take more interest than ever in the play.

The door closed behind them, and he turned his attention to Dr. Otto and his patient.

Suddenly the young doctor turned his head to the door, and then quickly left the room.

Colonel Poynter lay back in the chair with closed eyes.

"The effect of Doctor Otto's elixir has passed off, and he is weak again," thought Billy.

The following moment he beheld a sight which nearly loosened his grip on the bough.

A door directly behind the Southerner had opened, apparently without noise. Billy had not known before that a door was there.

A man came into the laboratory with his dark eyes fastened upon the chair.

He carried in one hand something that looked like a shawl; it had a terrible significance for the boy who looked on from the tree.

The man was Basil Porterham, and he had the tread of the sneaking panther.

The boy detective wanted to cry out and warn Poynter, but his tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth. He had to look on and keep silent.

All at once Basil Porterham leaned over the back of the chair, then the shawl, if shawl it was, ascended and dropped over the victim's face, so quickly that there was no chance for a cry of alarm.

The hood was drawn tight, and Basil Porterham lifted Poynter from the chair.

This seemed an easy task for the giant, and Billy saw his friend carried beyond the secret door and out of sight.

All this did not seem to occupy a minute of time. It had the semblance of some terrible dream to the young ferret of Gotham; but he knew it was real. Colonel Poynter had been taken from Dr. Otto's charge; he had been stolen by Basil Porterham!

What would become of him now?

Something seemed to hold the boy shadow to the bough.

What would the young doctor do when he came back? Ah, would he come back?

While Billy wondered thus, Dr. Otto entered the room.

He stopped short and stared at the empty chair.

Billy felt like tapping on the window and telling him all he knew; but he held back. He was curious to know what Dr. Otto would do.

Presently the doctor crossed the room. He seemed to touch a button in the wall, for the hidden door opened again.

In a moment he had disappeared and the room was empty once more.

Two minutes later Dr. Otto came back. He was flushed and excited.

"By heavens! they shall pay for this!" he cried, striking the table with his fist. "I know what it means. I hated the scheme from the start. They held a club over my head and made me serve them. If she were to come in now I'd tell her to look for another tool. It is the most infamous plot I ever heard of!"

The boy on the limb could stand it no longer.

"Hit or miss," said he, "I'm going to see Doctor Otto!"

The next moment his fingers struck the pane.

He saw the young doctor start at the sound and then come toward the window.

Billy tapped again and the sash was raised.

Dr. Otto fell back with a cry at sight of him, and before he could recover, the boy shadower had helped himself into the room!

"You?" exclaimed the doctor.

"Why not?" answered Billy. "I think I ought to be around at a time like this. We've met before; but never mind that. I happened to see the whole proceeding."

"What proceedings?" queried Dr. Otto.

"The theft of Colonel Poynter. The big man—Basil Porterham—did it."

There was no response.

"Maybe you think I oughtn't to interfere,"

continued the young street scout; "but I know of nobody who has a better right. Are you going to let them finish the colonel and drag you down with them? Why don't you break away from the gang and help us? They suspect you already. Basil Porterham believes that you have turned against them. He will tell the woman so; then—"

"How do you know this, boy?"

"I overheard him tell Morley."

Dr. Otto's face suddenly got another expression. It was one of resentment.

"They had better look out!" he said, madly.

"You are the man who should do so," put in Billy. "A pretty nest of scamps it is now. Morley stole the papers last night—"

"Stole the papers?"

"Yes. And now Basil Porterham has stolen Poynter."

"Where is the traitor?"

"Lemuel Lynx?"

"Lemuel Lynx."

"Oh, he is playing his card somewhere."

The boy detective eyed Dr. Otto closely, while he appeared to be deciding between good and evil.

"You ought to know where they will take Poynter," he said at length to Otto.

"I think I do," was the reply, "but, if they really suspect me, as you say they do, they may have selected another place."

"But let us go to work. No time is to be lost."

"Not if you would save Colonel Poynter," answered the doctor.

Billy saw the young chemist place a small leathern case in an inner pocket. His face had now a determined look, as if he had really turned against the conspirators whom he had served so long.

"Ah! some one is coming," suddenly exclaimed Otto. The boy shadow was seized and thrust behind a curtain stretched across one corner of the room.

He had heard nothing, but the doctor had, and he did not resist.

A moment passed and then the door opened.

"Well, here you are," exclaimed Dr. Otto, pleasantly, and a woman's voice replied.

The imprisoned boy drew the curtain aside and looked out.

He saw in the room the woman called Marcia, by Basil Porterham.

"How is he now?" she asked.

"About the same," rejoined the doctor.

"I'd like to look," she went on. "It does me good to see him occasionally. I used to see too much of him, ha, ha, ha! The game is nearly out, and we are winning it. About how much longer do you think he will last?"

"One cannot tell exactly."

"A week?"

"I don't know."

Marcia looked displeased.

"You ought to know!" she exclaimed. "If he should outlive the work of the secret drug, I'll know where to put the blame. They say there's a change in him;—that he looks improved. Beware! You can't afford to trifle with me!"

If Billy Bantam had never seen a human tigress before he saw one at that moment.

He was not prepared for the scene that followed.

Dr. Otto sprung suddenly at the woman and pushed her into the empty arm-chair before she could resist. Almost instantly several straps were in view, and Marcia was secured in the seat beyond possibility of escape without assistance.

Otto laughed at her ravings.

"Come!" he cried, dragging Billy from behind the curtain. "We haven't a moment to lose!" And they darted from the place together.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARCIA, THE MERCILESS.

If the two had come back a minute or so after their hasty exit they would have witnessed the frantic struggles of an enraged woman for liberty.

The prisoner of the chair hardly waited for the sounds of their feet to die away ere she commenced her efforts. But, Dr. Otto seemed to have provided against her strength for the straps were strong and well fastened. Still this did not prevent Marcia from working until her face got red and her eyes appeared ready to quit her head.

"A thousand curses rest upon him!" she exclaimed. "He has turned against us; he is leagued with the street rat whom we had in the trap for a time and who is Poynter's spy. I'll get even with Dr. Otto. I will show him that it

is dangerous to trifle with me. I know enough to blight his career, and he shall discover to his sorrow that Marcia, the Merciless, is no empty title."

Her struggles increased rather than diminished, and a supreme effort sent the chair over, and the woman, with a wild cry, went with it to the floor.

Her shriek died as suddenly as it had been uttered, for a dead silence followed the fall of the chair, and still imprisoned by the straps, Marcia lay like one dead on the carpet.

An hour later a man opened the door of the laboratory, and fell back at sight of her.

"Hello! what does this mean?" he exclaimed. "By Jove, she's tied in the chair, too! She isn't dead, though! No, there's life enough here to plague some one yet."

The speaker, who was no less a person than our old acquaintance, Lemuel Lynx, loosened the straps and picked Marcia up.

He bathed her temples with some water, and brought her back to consciousness.

Then he listened to the story of her strange experience. She had nothing but deep hatred for Dr. Otto. She would make him suffer for his work; he should never forget the avenging hand of the Merciless.

The detective did not like the information obtained from Marcia's story. It annoyed him.

If Dr. Otto had turned against the gang, was he (Lynx) safe? Would he not fall into the hands of the police when he went forth?

"As to Colonel Poynter," said the detective, "he is safe enough. Basil and Morley have him in a trap which the ingenuity and the shrewdness of Dr. Otto and the boy spy cannot find."

Marcia responded to this with an exclamation of joy.

"Still in our hands?" she cried. "I was afraid he had slipped through. So the game is not lost. It is ours in spite of the traitor and the gutter ferret!"

Marcia was then told where Colonel Poynter might be found, and she again thanked Lemuel Lynx for his timely assistance.

"But for your help I might have died here," said she. "I passed from one swoon into another. I felt that the end was near—that, when some one came, I would be found dead with the straps buried in my flesh."

Not long after these events a woman unlocked a certain door and looked into a room dimly lighted and almost stripped of furniture.

She saw a large rocking-chair in one corner, and her sharp eyes detected the figure that reclined in it.

"Ha! still in the toils!" she muttered gliding noiselessly forward. "I said I'd follow you to the death and I am here. Thought to escape me, did you? thought to hunt me down first with one sleuth-hound and then another, eh? They played you false, thanks to the power of gold! They hoodwinked you, even to Lemuel Lynx, the most trusted one of all. I've been too much for you. You can't escape from the shadow, Fergus Poynter. Your ferret friend is at fault, and Doctor Otto came over to your side too late in the game!"

She might have touched the man in the chair while she spoke, she stood so close to him. She bent forward with her hands clinched, and rage and triumph mingled in her dark eyes.

All at once she seemed to discover that the victim of the league was not asleep. Colonel Poynter's gaze was fixed upon her with a piercing steadiness which seemed to look her through.

"At last!" said the bloodless lips of the Southerner, and his skeleton hand came up until it covered her.

"You are right! At last!" was the answer.

"Where is he? What did you do with him?" continued the tenant of the chair.

"Ask the grave," was the cold-hearted response.

The uplifted hand dropped at its owner's side.

"Woman, you lie!" he cried. "I don't believe a word of it! I thought so once; but I got over that."

She came still nearer and with a bitter laugh.

"Find him, then!" she exclaimed. "If your son is living, hunt him up! Don't ask me for information. How do you feel?"

The question was a taunt, and, knowing it to be such, Poynter did not reply.

"To-morrow I'll see you again if you are here," she went on. "I told you, years ago, that I would bring you through a thousand tortures to the door of death. I have kept my word! Those in whom you have trusted

have betrayed you; they were all in my employ. You held on to the cross to the last; but, it went to the pawnbroker's, and from his safe it passed to me."

Poynter was as immobile as a statue. "To-morrow! don't forget!" she resumed, drawing back, and a moment later, she passed from the room and he was alone again.

Exerting all his strength, the victim of the plot left the chair and stood in the center of the room.

"I'll keep my oath! All the powers that be shall not prevent!" he cried. "I swore that I would live to see the guilty in the hands of justice, and I will! I know I am in the shadow of death—that the fatal midnight draught still has me in its power, and that it will conquer in the end. I am doomed. But in sight of Heaven I renew my oath! I will see the guilty brought to justice. I will live to punish! More than that, I will live to see my lost boy!"

If Marcia had listened at the door she might have heard these words; but she did not. In another part of the house she was looking into Basil Porterham's face while he told the story of the abduction of Poynter from Dr. Otto's office.

The big fellow told it with a good deal of zest.

"They won't find him here," he declared, in conclusion. "The Boy Beagle is sharp enough, but he is baffled now. Doctor Otto knows nothing of this retreat, and then the club we have held over his head so long will deter him from carrying his treachery too far. I'm glad Lynx came to the house in time to rescue you. We did not intend to go back."

"Colonel Poynter don't believe that the boy is dead," remarked Marcia suddenly.

"Neither do I."

The woman started and stared at Porterham. "What have you found out?" she exclaimed.

A puzzling smile was the reply.

"If you know anything about him, tell me!" cried Marcia, bending forward and clutching Porterham's arm. "You know how he was lost, years ago? When Morley came back from prison the boy had disappeared, and the trail was lost. It has been lost ever since. If I could but recover it now!"

"What would you do?"

"I'd make his last hours his bitterest!" she almost hissed, nodding toward the part of the house where she had left Colonel Poynter.

"Where would you look for the boy if you were going to find him?"

Porterham twirled the ends of his big mustache; but before he could answer, Marcia sprung with a cry to the window.

"What was it?" queried the big man.

"A face—a human face! It looked like Colonel Poynter's when he was a young man!"

CHAPTER XIX.

CLOSING IN.

BASIL PORTERHAM could not help looking at the woman. She was as white as a sheet, and was trembling from head to foot.

"It was not imagination!" she cried as if he doubted her word. "I saw a face at the window and I tell you that it looked like his. Now what were you going to tell me about the lost boy?"

The big man did not seem to hear the question. He went to the door and passed out, leaving the woman alone.

She waited impatiently for him but he did not come back.

By and by she went away herself, but not without taking another look at the man who seemed to be dying in his chair in the dim room.

"The game is nearly out," she said with a low triumphant laugh. "Now that you are away from Doctor Otto all the science in the world won't save you."

Colonel Poynter did not hear a word of this, and Marcia closed the door softly and locked it with a key which she took from her pocket.

Porterham soon afterward found on the street a small man whom he called Morley.

"Marcia saw a ghost awhile ago," said he with a smile.

"A ghost?" repeated Morley. "Where was it?"

"At the window of the house where he is."

"What was it like?"

"I did not see it, but Marcia called it a face which resembled the colonel's a good many years ago."

Morley started.

"I guess I know whose face it was," said he.

"Well?"

"Lemuel Lynx has a fellow-boarder. I saw him when I went up to the detective's room last

night, and the surprise nearly knocked me on my feet. No wonder Marcia thought the face at the window looked like Fergus Poynter's. By Jupiter! it would have given me a shock."

"But, tell me—"

"I'd sooner let you see for yourself," was the interruption. "We'll find him somewhere between now and morning. It wasn't Billy Bantam's phiz, Basil."

"No! Marcia knows the boy."

"She has cause to."

The two pards went away together, and, half an hour afterward the hand of Morley sought Basil's wrist.

"Look straight ahead at the young man standing in front of old Mordecai's trap," he whispered.

The big man obeyed.

"Great Caesar!" he exclaimed, "that is the ghost Marcia saw."

"Of course," returned Morley. "That is Lynx's fellow boarder. They call him Noah Natcher, but you know what his real name is."

Porterham said nothing but looked at the young man thus singled out, eyeing him from head to foot with the scrutiny of a hawk.

"You've found him at last, Morley," said he, without looking toward his companion. "I've suspected his existence, and was preparing Marcia for it when his face appeared at the window. Now, what are you going to do?"

"We'll finish the game in hand first."

"But he may be a spy."

"He and Billy Bantam are friends."

"Leagued against us, eh?"

"Certainly."

"We've got to look after them. Noah Natcher is standing in front of the old pawnbroker's for a purpose. Does he think you pawned the papers?"

"He's not so big a fool as that," grinned Morley.

"Ah! the mystery is clear now," and the two men fell back a step as the figure of the boy detective emerged from the shop and joined Noah.

"The old fellow is as mute as a clam," they heard Billy say.

"Then we'll work the other racket," was the reply. "The house on X—street will give us something—I'm sure it will. Don't tell the doctor. We may need him when we've found the colonel."

Other words were spoken, but the two partners heard no more.

"Tracked down!" growled Porterham. "The foxes have found the new retreat. Back to it at once! They will come to it to rescue. We can catch them both! Now or never, Morley! We never had a chance like this!"

They let Noah and Billy disappear unmolested, and started back toward the house which had become Colonel Poynter's prison.

"They won't come early in the night," said Morley. "They'll wait for the wee sma' hours." And he led the way into a big cafe where he ordered a supper with a prodigality that nearly took Basil's breath.

The couple enjoyed themselves at the table. They had a cozy corner and broke a full bottle each over the rich repast.

Morley told how he lost his little *protege* some years before; how he had been suddenly removed from his guardianship by officers of the law; how, as he learned since, Marcia had sent him some letters containing money which the boy had probably appropriated to his own use.

"I'm not mistaken, Basil," he concluded. "The resemblance was too striking to deceive me. We can play a new hand with the boy for a trump card. Marcia has plenty of money, and it sticks to her fingers too well to suit me. The discovery of the boy is a bonanza. It opens a new mine of wealth to us, don't you see?"

Porterham bowed and smiled.

The feasters got through at last. As they came toward the open front door of the establishment they did not see the two plain-looking men who were watching them closely, nor did they hear these words spoken by a boy:

"Those are the birds—the big and the little one, Basil Porterham and Morley."

As the two men reached the door they were simultaneously nabbed.

Basil drew his stalwart figure up indignantly and glared at his captor. Morley's face got white. Both knew into whose hands they had fallen.

"What's the charge?" stammered the little man.

"Conspiracy, robbery, abduction and several others," coolly answered one of the officers.

"Who makes it?"

"It is made in the name of one Fergus Poynter."

The two rascals exchanged swift glances.

"If there's a boy in the mess, the whole thing's a villainous scheme!" cried Basil.

The two officers smiled.

Not long afterward a man well known to the reader ran up a flight of steps and opened a small trunk in one corner of a small room.

He took out a few small things in a hasty manner and concealed them on his person.

"I don't want to let any Gotham grass grow under my feet!" said he to himself. "The jig seems to be up; the gutter rat and his friend, my next door neighbor, have played a successful hand. Doctor Otto will turn against the gang. They've already bagged Basil and Morley; but, Marcia eludes them. Colonel Poynter is likely to fulfill his oath, thanks to the Boy Beagle, for beagle he has proved himself to be. I must be off at once!" And Lemuel Lynx pulled his hat down over his eyes and left Mrs. Rotherman's boarding-house forever.

He made hasty tracks toward the ferry. The boat was just quitting the pier, and his leap was a marvel to all who saw it.

He entered the gentlemen's cabin, and, nearly out of breath, took the first seat that offered itself.

"Going South, Mr. Lynx?" asked a voice at his elbow.

Lemuel turned with a start, looked once at the speaker, then sprung up, and darting from the cabin, leaped over the chain into the river!

In a second the double-faced detective had disappeared.

CHAPTER XX.

PERSEVERANCE WINS.

THERE was great excitement on board the ferry-boat over this unexpected and tragic event. The craft was stopped as soon as possible, and several hundred eyes looked for the New Orleans detective.

The man from whose side he had sprung announced to some in a quiet manner that he was a detective on the lookout for Mr. Lynx, and, he added significantly, that it would be no great loss if the rascal never turned up alive.

The search was a vain one. Lemuel Lynx had effectually disappeared, and the ferry-boat resumed its journey.

Meantime a haggard-looking man, reclining in an arm-chair, was talking to a boy who stood near by, hat in hand, and on the eye of going out.

"It's a blessed thing to get back to the old quarters once more," said the occupant of the chair, who was Colonel Poynter, found in his new prison through the assistance of Noah, whose face had startled Marcia, as already described. "Doctor Otto has probably fled the city, although he has turned against the gang, and I won't feel the cheering effects of his powerful antidote."

"If the doctor is in New York he shall be found," responded the boy, Billy Bantam. "We've corraled Porterham and Morley; a lot of detectives have been posted and are looking for Lemuel Lynx and the woman. I tell you, colonel, we're getting there in fine shape!"

"Find the woman!—find Lemuel Lynx, the traitor!" exclaimed Poynter. "I want to stand face to face with them once more! I never suspected that man. I thought him faithful among the faithless. I would have trusted my life in that man's keeping. Now I see him with his mask off. What a base scoundrel! As to the woman—Marcia the Merciless, she calls herself—I can have some pity for her, despite her many crimes. Bring her to me, boy! I will be here. I feel the deadly draught in my system; but I will fight it off until I have triumphed over them. The oath registered in Heaven shall be kept!"

A few minutes later, when Colonel Poynter was alone in his old quarters, the door opened and the face of Noah Natcher appeared at the threshold.

The young clerk looked at Poynter, apparently asleep in the chair, and stole forward. He did not notice that the eyes of the Southerner were riveted upon him as they were from the moment of his coming, but, when he stood within arm's length of the patient he became aware of his watchful eagerness.

"My God! at last!" suddenly exclaimed Poynter, throwing out his hands. "I don't have to ask Marcia for her secret."

Noah gave a cry and fell back. He stared at Colonel Poynter as if he thought him bereft of reason.

"Come!" continued the conspirators' victim.

"What! do you desert me? You, the stolen child of the plantation?"

He left the chair and came toward Noah, who, still not understanding him, recoiled another step.

The next moment Poynter halted. He was seen to retrace his steps, his figure reeled like a drunkard's, and Noah sprung forward to support him, but too late—Poynter fell senseless at the foot of his chair!

"Look, Nanice! We have them again! We have trapped the game, and here are the lost papers; but they are useless now, for Colonel Poynter is going to live to see his name vindicated."

Nanice of Bottle Alley looked at Billy Bantam, her eyes full of amazement, and wondering if he had not lost his wits.

When he quieted down he told her how he had found Poynter in the old house, how a search of the place had revealed the lost records and the gold cross, how Basil Porterham and Morley had fallen into the hands of justice, and finally how he knew, from Noah's description of the scene at the Southerner's old quarters, that the young clerk was nameless no longer!

The overjoyed girl could hardly believe.

"Marcia and Lemuel Lynx are yet at large," he went on, "but we will get them both. Colonel Poynter wants to see them once more. He wants to meet the double-faced detective and the woman who was once his wife. We'll put the police of New York on their trail. The underground corridor brought forth splendid fruit in the end."

"But Doctor Otto?" queried Nanice. "You have not mentioned him."

"He is missing," answered Billy. "He is the man who can bring Colonel Poynter back to health, if human agency can accomplish that miracle. He made the secret death-draught for Marcia. He must be found; he must keep Colonel Poynter this side of the grave. We will forgive him his part of the conspiracy if he does this."

The girl clasped her hands and said something which Billy did not catch.

The next day and the next there came to the hunters no tidings of Marcia the Merciless.

Lemuel Lynx had not reappeared, as if the river had refused to give him up.

Colonel Poynter had become convinced that in Noah he had found the child who had been stolen from his cradle by the wicked woman, once his wife, and the young clerk, with Nanice, was watching over the victim of the deadly draught.

Billy Bantam was ever on the alert, and the detectives were assisting him to find Dr. Otto and Marcia.

At last—it was the fifth day after the arrest of Porterham and Morley—the Boy Beagle saw a veiled woman enter a certain house near the river.

It was not the first time he had followed her within the past two days.

After a while the agile youth stole to the rear of the house, dropped into the basement, and came up into the house proper.

How dark and still it was!

He climbed the wide staircase in the hall, and was stopped at the head of the flight by a singular noise. He went down the corridor and listened at a door. All at once he was startled by the fall of a heavy body inside; then the silence of death reigned again.

The Boy Beagle turned the knob. The door yielded and he went in. The darkness of the tomb enveloped him.

By and by Billy struck a match, and, as the flame leaped up he fell back with a cry.

The body of a woman lay at his feet.

One look told him that he had found Marcia the Merciless.

There, in that little up-stairs room of the old house, the exciting trail of the Boy Beagle came to an end, for, when he went back to tell those who waited for him how he had fared, he saw a man banded over Colonel Poynter.

Billy Bantam uttered a cry of delight.

It was Dr. Otto!

The young man had come to the front of his own accord—he had come to do what he could for the Southerner, and then surrender to the law. So he said, at any rate.

Colonel Poynter for months lingered between life and death, but the change for the better came at last. He went back to the scenes of his misfortunes, he vindicated his name before the people, and began life anew.

Noah Poynter—once Noah Natcher—took

Nanice from her cramped quarters in Bottle Alley, and gave her a better home, where Billy was always welcome, and the young people's wedding-trip, with the Boy Beagle to keep them company, extended to Colonel Poynter's new place in the South.

It turned out that Morley had robbed both the safe of the pawnshop and the safe of the store; that the button belonged to his coat, as Billy had suspected, and so forth. The two graceless rascals went "up the river" for a long term, where they still curse the shrewdness and the skill of Billy Bantam, the boy who stuck to Colonel Poynter through thick and thin.

THE END.

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